

Seeing and knowing first-hand, August 18, 2024

Mark 8:18 - "You have eyes to see but you do not see"

One of the gems of northern Pend Oreille County is Sullivan Lake. It is 4 miles by 1 mile. The long east side edge is bounded by craggy Hall Mountain that steeply rises 4,000 feet from the lake level. The west side is similar but timbered. The lake is in a tight valley and has a depth of 320 feet. The water is crystal clear.

The lake is stream fed and the highway that runs along the west side of the lake crosses a bridge at the north end lake outlet. Jumping off the bridge is a rite of passage. I could tell you all about jumping off the bridge, how high it is, how fast you will be traveling when you hit the water, the depth of the water, typical water temperature. I could show you photos of people jumping off the bridge. You could know all about jumping off the bridge but it would all be second hand knowledge. One day you jump off the bridge. You now have first-hand knowledge, experiential knowledge. You now know because you really know. You could tell people about the momentary feeling of weightlessness, how you feel your feet touch the water and then in an instant you are submerged so fast that your body is surrounded by bubbles, how after your first jump you swim to shore and climb the bank as fast as you can because you can't wait to do it again, but they really won't get it until they do it.

I have often mentioned that God is right here, fully present in each and every one of us. I also believe that we are more united than separate. Our separateness is an illusion. God is like the ocean. We are only tiny drops but we are all part of the ocean. We always have been. We come from God and will return to God. My beliefs are based on what I have read, written by people I trust. I have never experienced it. It is all second-hand knowledge.

I want to talk about mystical experiences, spiritual awakening or change of consciousness. Moving from secondhand knowledge to firsthand knowledge is how I like to think of it. I have never heard a sermon about the topic, yet it is something we all long to experience, to have the veil parted even for just a second. To not just know because of something we were taught but to know because of something we have directly experienced. To really know.

Donald W. McCormick was a professor for 30 years. He taught leadership and

organizational change. Currently he is the director of education for Unified Mindfulness. He is a member of Grass Valley Meeting in Nevada City, CA. In his book Reclaiming a Neglected Quaker Tradition he says, “Many influential Quakers, such as Rufus Jones, Marcelle Martin, and Howard Brinton, have seen mysticism as the heart of Quakerism. In her Pendle Hill Pamphlet “Quaker Views On Mysticism”, Margery Post Abbott wrote in the mid-1990s, “I interviewed articulate Quakers from Britain, Philadelphia, and the Pacific Northwest, many holding major positions in monthly or yearly meetings. These sixty-plus Friends overwhelmingly agreed that ours is a mystical faith.”

Continuing, McCormick explains that there are two types of mystical experiences: theistic and unitive. The theistic mystical experience is “an awareness of a ‘holy other’ beyond nature, with which one is felt to be in communion.” It’s the direct experience of the Spirit or of God. In Quakerism, mystical experience is usually thought of in theistic terms. Hearing the still, small voice of the Spirit is an example of this. Theistic mystical experiences can take the form of visions or voices, as they did with George Fox. The most common venue for theistic mystical experiences is worship, where people feel the presence of the Spirit.

The unitive is the other type of mystical experience and scholars put them into two categories: introvertive and extrovertive.

In the introvertive unitive mystical experience, there is an overwhelming sense of oneness, but there are no thoughts, emotions, or perceptions. No sense of time, place, or self. And it’s ineffable; that is, it’s impossible to adequately convey in words.

In the extrovertive unitive mystical experience, the person “continues to perceive the same world of trees and hills and tables and chairs as the rest of us . . . but sees these items transfigured in such a manner that Unity shines through them,”. In this type, one’s sense of self merges with what one is perceiving. One may directly experience oneness with everything—with other Quakers at a gathered meeting or with the ocean.

These qualities of mystical experience aren’t thoughts or ideas. One doesn’t think about or feel the oneness of everything; it is experienced directly. People often

see their unitive mystical experience as a source of knowledge more valid than everyday reality, and feel the experience is sacred or divine.

All of the above is new to me. I figured mystical experiences would only happen to really holy people, like monks, certainly not to me. I don't believe that anymore. I wait with anticipation. I believe it will be helpful to look at some transformative experiences people have had.

**Pendel Hill**, in her book Our Life is Love writes: "One night . . . I was walking under the stars and I suddenly knew that the stars were me. I was in the stars. That we were part of a oneness and that there was a light flowing through everything and connecting everything and I could feel it flowing through my body and out of my arms and out of my fingers into the world with great power. It wasn't my power. It was like a power of this divine reality. It took me a few years before I could say, "That's God" because it was so different from what my expectations of what God was like."

**Caryll Houselander** - The twentieth-century English mystic (1901–1954) describes how an ordinary underground train journey in London transformed into a vision that changed her life. "All sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging—workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them—but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too . . . all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come. I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere—Christ. In Him every kind of life has a meaning and has an influence on every other kind of life. Realization of our oneness in Christ is the only cure for human loneliness. For me, too, it is the only ultimate meaning of life, the only thing that gives meaning and purpose to every life.

After a few days the "vision" faded. People looked the same again, there was no longer the same shock of insight for me each time I was face to face with another human being. Christ was hidden again; indeed, through the years to come I would have to seek for Him, and usually I would find Him in others—and still more in myself—only through a deliberate and blind act of faith."

**Thomas Merton**, a Trappist monk that resurrected the Catholic tradition of contemplative prayer had this experience:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. But this cannot be seen, only believed and ‘understood’ by a peculiar gift.”

**Etty Hillesum**, (1914-1943) was a Dutch Jewish woman who had the opportunity to stay in Amsterdam but chose to go to Westerbork concentration camp to “share her people’s fate.” She was transferred to Auschwitz in September 1943 and died that November. Etty never fully identified as a Christian or religious, but her personal writing reveals a mystic, someone who had a deep awareness of her own inner life and her union with others and God. The following quotes are not about specific mystical experiences Etty had but how she saw differently. In July 1943 from the transit concentration camp Westerbork, she wrote: “The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart—I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world.” In another section of her diary she writes, “The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down for a chat, the sun is shining on my face – and right before our eyes, mass murder... The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension.”

**James Finley**, writing on seeing said: “What if we could all close our eyes right now and be interiorly awakened? And what if, when we open our eyes, we would see through our own awakened eyes what Jesus saw in all that he saw? What would we see? We’d see God! Because Jesus saw God in all that he saw. What’s wonderful about this is that it didn’t matter whether Jesus saw his own mother or a prostitute, the joy of those gathered at a wedding or the sorrow of those gathered at the burial of a loved one. It didn’t matter whether he saw his disciples or his executioners, or a bird or a tree—Jesus saw God in all that he saw.’

Drawing on the work of American thinker Ken Wilber, **Rohr** describes the waking up stage of transformation. “By Waking Up we are speaking of any spiritual experience which overcomes our experience of the self as separate from Being in general. This is variously referred to as enlightenment, awakening, or unitive consciousness, and it should be the full Christian meaning of salvation. Unfortunately, we pushed all waking up into something that would hopefully happen later, in heaven or after death, or as a reward for good behavior in this world. This was a major loss and defeat for Christianity and a disastrous misplacement of attention. We became a religion of religious transactions more than spiritual transformation. Waking up should be the goal of all spiritual work, sacraments, and Bible study, but, at least in the West, this has not been the case. Because we had a bias against inner experience, it seemed very presumptuous to actually believe—or believe possible—the conclusion of every significant mystic: Jesus’ “I and the Father are one” (see John 10:30), Augustine’s “God is closer to me than I am to myself,” or Catherine of Genoa’s “My deepest me is God.”

Query: Have you ever had a transformative, enlightening, experience?

I am going to get the ball rolling. Have I ever had a spiritually transformative awakening experience? Sometimes pieces of music affect me deeply. When I first heard Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” I was overcome with a deep sense of sadness strangely mixed with euphoria. The Adagio can still do that to me. “Benedictus” by Karl Jenkins causes the hairs on my arms to raise and I am elated. Sometimes when I think about the state of affairs, I am saddened but then I get this deep feeling that all is well and good. From God? They say all good things are of God so I guess so. Transformative? I still seem to be the same old mediocre me.

