

Imaginal

We live in an age when even the prospect of there being paths towards transcendence is treated with great suspicion. Of course, almost by definition, we know better. But this trackless world that confronts many has known paths that seek to map out the landscapes of the mind or with Samatha to the fore, the heart (*citta*) scape of being. What I would like to do here is to take our imagination and follow the guidelines of another path that we might know ours better.

So we first have to accept the presence of God as the Creator of all. Please just imagine this – no more and no less and forget in this imagining all the clutter of our views and others' expectations. Just the presence of God as Creator of all.

Here is a short poem by George Herbert to help us on our way:

## The Pulley

When God at first made man,  
Having a glass of blessings standing by,  
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.  
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,  
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;  
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,  
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,  
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,  
He would adore my gifts instead of me,  
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;  
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlessness;  
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,  
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness  
May toss him to my breast."

Now let me introduce the guideline – it is known as the Sparkling Stone<sup>i</sup> by John of Ruysbroeck who died 632 years ago in the Low Countries. The Sparkling Stone is small, and does not hurt even if we

were to tread on it. It shines white and red like a flame of fire and is round, smooth and very light. Even though it is easy to miss or to disregard, it contains our name and this is the same for all who turn and return towards God. Now what of the people in this trackless world and the path of the Sparkling Stone?

Though all are invited many decline to take interest in the Sparkling Stone or the way it presents. These are sinners and are of five kinds – some are careless of good works and prefer to live in worldly employments and in multiplicity of heart. They are unfit to receive the grace of God and if they had received it, they would not be able to keep it. The second are those who willingly and wittingly have fallen into mortal sin. The third are those who do not believe and without true faith cannot please God. The fourth are those who abide in mortal sin without fear and without shame. They can be converted, he says, but this happens with difficulty and seldom. Finally the fifth kind of sinner is those who do outward good works to acquire a name for holiness or for the sake of some fleeting thing.

Now we turn to those who are left. Ruysbroeck says they are of four kinds – each may lead on from the other. The first is the *hireling*. These are those who love themselves so inordinately that they will not serve God save for their own profit and because of their own reward, these separate themselves from God, and dwell in bondage and in their own selfhood; for they seek, and aim at, their own, in all that they do. As a consequence, they do not trust God because they are inwardly unfaithful and their whole inward life is doubt and fear, travail and misery.

But, with God's help, the hireling can overcome selfhood – when he is so detached from himself that he is able to leave in the keeping of God everything of which he has need, God bestows his grace and he feels true love which removes doubt and fear and fills him with hope and trust. In this way he becomes instead a *faithful servant* and loves God in all that he does.

The faithful servant of God has chosen to keep the commandments of God, is obedient to God, and this is called the outward or active life. The next type chooses to follow, besides the commandments, the quickening counsels of God, and this is a loving and inward holding to God and a willing abandonment of all that one may possess outside God. These are the *secret friends* of God which He invites inward and teaches them the distinctions of inward exercises. But none can do and feel the inward exercises unless he be wholly turned inward to God. All secret friends of God are also at the same time faithful servants, wherever this is needful; but all the faithful servants are not secret friends for the exercise which belongs thereto is unknown to them.

And yet there is a subtle and inward difference between the secret friends and the *hidden sons* of God which is the final group. Both, by inward exercise, maintain themselves in the Presence of God. But the friends possess their inwardness as an attribute which they choose as best and highest. They have images and intermediaries between God and themselves, their own being and their own activity. Though they feel united with God in loving adherence, they always feel a difference and otherness between God and themselves. For the simple passing into the Bare and Wayless, they do not know and love: and therefore their highest inward life ever remains in reason and in ways. They

greatly value the gifts of God and also their own inward works, and the solace and sweetness which they feel within; and thus they rest upon the way, and do not wholly die to themselves, as to be able to attain the highest beatitude in bare and wayless love. Could we renounce ourselves and all our selfhood in our works we should become hidden sons of God, with a bare and imageless spirit, transcending all things, without intermediary. When we are made one with God, there is a quickening knowledge and an active love. So, if we are to have this fruition of God we need true peace – able with a free heart to renounce for the glory of God everything one does or loves inordinately. We need an inward silence where we are empty and free of images of all things which we ever saw or which we ever heard. And we need a loving adherence to God. With these there comes the common life. He is just and truthful in he possesses a rich and a generous ground set in the richness of God, and therefore he must always spend himself on those who have need of him.

To me the common life, the wayless love, the life of the hidden sons of God, bring us back full circle to trackless world we started with but with what a difference. To finish a poem by Seamus Heaney<sup>ii</sup>

### Lightenings viii

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise  
Were all at prayers inside the oratory  
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep  
It hooked itself into the altar rails  
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope  
And struggled to release it. But in vain.  
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So  
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back  
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

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The Sparkling Stone is a book by Ruysbroeck which circulated in medieval times and was known by Julian of Norwich. One translation can be found here <http://saints.sqpn.com/the-sparkling-stone-by-blessed-jan-van-ruysbroeck/>

The choice of poems very much comes from Heaney and his book *The Redress of Poetry*.