

Beatrice Bruteau

Prayer and Identity

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I

The way into the spiritual life is a matter of radical transformation. The further we progress along it, the more radical we realize the transformation has to be. The whole work of prayer is to cause, to control, and to appreciate certain transformations. Fundamental to these, so far as I see at present, is the sense of identity. The work of prayer is to transform our sense of identity. The Letter of James in the New Testament contains this passage:

If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being not a hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing. (James 1:23-25)

We can apply these words to our work in prayer. The prayer state, when developed, should be, first a mirror, and then a real environment, of our natural face. It is a matter of looking, with perseverance, into the perfect law of liberty — what I will later call *creative freedom* — until there is no more question of our looking away and forgetting our true identity. Insofar as we are not prayerful, we are at present in a state of forgetfulness; we do not know who we are.

Plato spoke of this mythically when he suggested that people choose the lives they will live before they are born and then drink the waters of Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness; after being born, he says, they no longer recall the larger context in which their earthly and temporal lives are set, the context that would have revealed to them a deeper dimension of their selfhood. Plunged in Lethe, in forgetfulness, they simply identify themselves with the particular roles which they are playing in life, as artisans or parents, merchants or politicians, poets or philosophers. If they are awakened by careful reasoning that presses on to intellectual insight, or by the quest of love for absolute beauty, they may remember that

greater, transtemporal realm. This remembrance, says Plato, brings them to truth, to reality, called *aletheia*, non-forgetfulness.

The Hindus tell us that we are subject to *avidya*, not-seeing, and that we mistake our selfhood, confusing it with our ego-personality and our temporal history. They recommend the practice of yoga to bring us to realization of the Absolute Self. A popular Zen Buddhist subject for meditation is the demand, "Show me your original face, the face you had before your parents were born." The Taoists speak of our "original nature," which they liken to an "uncarved block," and they urge that wisdom consists in finding this again as our true identity.

The problem of identity in all these traditions is clearly a fundamental spiritual problem. Prayer, therefore, the spiritual exercise, is, in an important respect, a matter of clarifying our sense of identity. And this clarification can be experienced as analogous to awakening, remembering, or seeing correctly.

Our difficulty is that we tend to think that we do see already, that we do know, that we are awake. It is just because we say "we see" that we remain caught in the difficulty. (Cf. John 9:41.) This is why I said that the further we progress, the more radical the transformation becomes. At each level or stage, we are still assuming certain things, still taking certain things for granted, without knowing that we are assuming them or taking them for granted. We so definitely see them as reality that it does not occur to us to question them, and it does not even occur to us to notice that we do not question them.

It is from the surrounding darkness of the unnoticed taken-for-granted things that certain notions will spring into light as each successive spiritual illumination takes place. Each time we discover to our amazement that something we had all along supposed to be so, is not that way. Usually this happens in such a way that the entire ground on which the previous conception had been based is cut away, so that while the previous affirmation is dissolved, its corresponding negation is made inapplicable also. One finds that the whole situation has to be reconceived from a new perspective or on a new foundation.

I sometimes think that the strange, mysterious, miraculous, and paradoxical events and sayings which the spiritual traditions set before us for our contemplation have as one of their functions to make us realize that we did not know something we thought we knew. For instance, in the case of the Eucharist, when a man can

take up a bit of bread and say of it "This is my body," one of the things that should become clear to us is that we have never known what any "body" was. It should force us to go back and rethink "body" in all its contexts, all over again. As long as we assume we know what "body" means and focus our attention on questions built on this assumption, we risk remaining embroiled in naive and even bizarre problems. When the "body" assumption is traced and transcended, these problems disappear.

Another example is the question whether one is free. This debate often takes the form of asking us to decide between being free to choose or else being necessitated or compelled to act as we do. Here the assumption is that the only kind of freedom there is is freedom of choice, that freedom consists precisely in the act of choosing. But if we can show another meaning for "freedom," one which is still deeper and even more "free" than is choice-freedom, then the debate will have to be reassessed. In this case I have proposed the concept of "creative freedom," in which the origin and stimulation of the action is entirely in the agent, as against "choice-freedom," in which the stimulus of the act is in the agent's environment, which presents the alternatives and evokes the motive for choosing between them. One who exercises creative freedom may not experience choosing and yet not be compelled, and this realization should mean a more profound appreciation of what freedom, action, and the person as agent really are. This has something to do with the identity that I think we discover in prayer, and I will come back to it.

But quite apart from whether one wishes to take up the particular content of these examples, this is the methodological structure of the kind of breakthrough I am talking about as a movement from one stage to another of the spiritual life. The point is that the question shifts its ground—usually to one more general and extensive—and when the ground shifts, the original questions either disappear or take a different form.

Applying this pattern of illumination now to the question of identity, I want to say that we *think* we know who "we" are, and on the basis of this secure knowledge, we debate whether we are weak or strong, good or evil, capable of changing ourselves or not, and many similar topics. Again, my suggestion is that in the course of a developing prayer life we realize that we have been making certain assumptions about our identity which are not true, not deep enough, not dynamic enough, or otherwise too limited.

II

What is our identity, when we begin our series of transformations? We locate our selfhood in the experienter of pleasure and pain. This means in the first instance in our human body of flesh, and then in the emotional nature of our human personality. We believe that "we" are the one who is comfortable or uncomfortable who is happy or unhappy. This seems obvious and undeniable. What happens then in prayer? The first prayer tries to correct and control the experience-environment of this self. It petitions the God who operates the environment to send the self pleasant experiences and to withdraw the painful ones. Sometimes it seems that these prayers are "answered," or granted, because a preponderance of pleasant experiences then follows and the consequent satisfaction convinces the one who prays of the reality of the transaction and of the value of the virtue of faith.

More often, the painful experiences continue, and then the prayer life undertakes to transform these into pleasant experiences, that is to say, into some kind of satisfaction by finding meaning in them. The painful experiences may be seen as purifying or penance, as reparation, or as preparatory to a positive experience yet to come. This approach can be further elevated to the experience of sharing in the redemptive sufferings of Christ. This perspective on life produces a deep level of satisfaction in the experienter, even though the surface level of the human life is painful. But in order for this to happen, the experienter has had to share the sense of selfhood a bit from the level of the sense-body and the emotional personality to the understanding and believing level of the mind.

Another approach to the prayer life locates our selfhood in the performer of moral acts. This moral-agent-self then relates to God in prayer in terms of God's approval or disapproval, in terms of pleasing or displeasing God, in terms of seeking God's aid to what is morally right in itself. As this prayer life progresses, it discovers many things about oneself. Some people report that they find in the depths of themselves the potentiality for all kinds of evil. Possibly they find also the potentiality for heroic goodness. People become very sensitive to their motives for behaving certain ways; there seem to be wheels within wheels within the accounting for attitudes, feelings, and actions. Their prayer tends to be focused on analyzing or seeing into the deeper roots of their motives and seeking—and asking divine aid—to purify these motives. On the constructive side, the one who prays

probably also contemplate and strive to imitate the good motives and good deeds of Christ and His saints and invoke the latter's help in making a good moral-agent-self. Here the sense of identity is located more in the person as actor than in the person as receiver of good or bad experiences.

A fourth approach reflects on all the foregoing and draws a metaphysical conclusion: "I am nothing; God is everything." I am a creature, a contingent, finite, and flawed being. I can do nothing of myself but sin. The source of all being and all goodness is God alone, who is Another Being; whatever share in being and goodness I have, I have it only as God's gift to me. All I can do is receive.

Now, I wish to make two comments on these modalities of identity and prayer. The first comment is this: If the identity is located as indicated, the prayer life that follows is correct. One who identifies with the pleasures and pains of the flesh and the emotions and who identifies God as the controller of these experiences is bound to appeal to God to control the experiences in the experienter's favor, even if the satisfaction level has to go from the flesh and the emotions to an interpreted sense of meaningfulness. God may not then give pleasure but meaning, and that is more important. One who identifies with the moral-agent-self acts correctly in contemplating God as exemplar and in using the prayer exercise to purify the moral motives and strengthen the moral virtues. And one who identifies with finite and contingent being does right to contemplate God as the Source of Infinite and Absolute Being. We may also notice that the self-identification always carries with it a corresponding God identification. The two undergo their transformations together, and I think that the self-identification probably comes first, drawing the God-identification after it as its complement.

The second comment is the difficult one. It suggests that all of these modes of prayer have in common an unquestioned concept of the nature and location of the self which is not necessary and may not be the best we can do. If we change it, let us look for the sort of thing to happen that happened in the other examples, that is, we will not switch from the affirmation in our assumption to its negation, but we will reframe the whole outlook so that both of those views will be seen to be inadequate or inapplicable.

All the above modes of prayer assume without question that the identity of the one who prays is in the finite order. Let us see what this implies. To be finite means to be a determinate being, one

with particular qualities or predicates, one capable of description. It is to be *this* rather than *that*, to have one's being limited by what one is not. "All determination is by negation," the logicians say, and this is true. The chair is not the table. I am not you—as long as we think this way. In fact, my very being "I" is dependent on my not-being "you." This is our cherished individuality, our unique personality, our inalienable responsibility for our own moral acts which merit praise or blame, and so on.

But please notice, it is precisely this location of our identity that produces the experiences of pleasure and pain, the involutions of moral motivation, and ultimately the sense of metaphysical impotence. A self which identifies itself by excluding and negating other beings—which defines itself by saying "I am I insofar as I am not you"—necessarily must defend its finite being against the competitive presence of all other finite beings. All other beings must be dealt with in some way so that they enhance, or at least protect, one's own being and do not harm it. One must either destroy them, or convert them to one's own use, or possibly arrange to live in a subordinate and dependent position relative to a stronger being. Very rarely one may work out a fairly equal symbiotic relation of interdependence. All relations are relations of "having," as distinguished from "being," beginning with "having" existence, and these relations are important to the self for maintaining it in existence and making its life worthwhile.

Now it may be that this perception and identification of the self as defined by mutual negation, as obliged to defend itself in relation to all other beings, is in error. This is what it is to walk away from the mirror and forget our natural face. We take on instead a set of artificial faces. We present ourselves to the world under our various titles, our roles, our functions, our relations. We have only to make a quick test, asking ourselves to answer the question "Who are you?" to see that our spontaneous way of identifying ourselves is in terms of these categories and classes of descriptions. I should say here clearly that these relations, roles, and functions are real and true. And the need to define them by mutual negation and to defend them by various arrangements of subordination or dependence is correct. As functions or aspects or levels of our life in the world, this is unavoidable. The question is whether the spiritual self should settle its identity-location in any of them, where the very heart of selfhood should find itself there. The question is that when it does so settle, locate, and identify itself one of its functional or artificial faces for its natural

The business of the spiritual life is to remember and return to identifying with our natural face. This can be done, the Epistle of St. James says, by looking into the perfect law of liberty. Then, restored to identity with our natural face, we will be able to be doers of the word and not hearers only. If we are hearers only, it is because we identify our ultimate selfhood with the finitude of the artificial faces, their contingency and fragility and our consequent anxiety about them or passivity with respect to the powers that do maintain them.

III

If we are to follow up on the teaching that the work of the spiritual life is the recovery of our natural face as preparation for the doing of the word, then a quite different type of prayer must be practiced. All the modes of prayer which I described earlier accepted the notion that the descriptive self is the true self, and they proceeded to operate in prayer on this basis. Now we are entertaining the suggestion that the real work of prayer is just to get rid of the very assumption that was the foundation of all these other modes of prayer.

It is a matter of shifting the location of the sense of identity. We have to accept the idea that the word 'I' does not have a fixed and clear and obvious referent. This is where the transformation that we undergo becomes more and more radical with each breakthrough or illumination. What happens at each stage is that the meaning of the word 'I' changes. At least, this is one way of putting it.

It is instructive, I believe, in this connection to notice the various utterances attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, ranging them in a spectrum from "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God," through "I do nothing of myself, but the Father dwelling in me performs his works," and "I do as the Father commands me," or "I do what I see the Father doing," up to the final "The Father and I are one; whoever sees me sees the Father." The referents of the word 'I' in these speeches are not the same. This is the point we have to grasp and to apply to ourselves.

This is a difficult point to grasp, probably because we are so accustomed to the notion of a fixed meaning for the word 'I' and also because our whole language system is set up on the assumption that the world is composed of a multitude of separate substances, hard bounded beings, different and distinct from one another.

I have suggested the image of a spectrum, at one end of which the self says "I am very different from God." In the middle the self says, "I do nothing but God is in me, doing." A little later it says, "I also do things, but only by obeying God, or by imitating what God does." Only at the other extreme of the spectrum does the self say "God and I are not different; it doesn't make sense to ask to see God as distinct from seeing me; we can't be separated that way." In this image we may suppose the spectrum itself to remain steady, laid out like a slide rule on a desk. But then the little magnifying lens, through which one focuses on the reading, moves from one end of the scale to the other. This moving lens is the sense of identity.

I want to be clear that the positions on the rule itself do not change. The level of reality that cannot claim goodness for itself is still there, and still unable to claim goodness for itself. The level that is an instrument for divine activity remains, and remains an instrument. The level that acts, but acts under obedience or under guidance from above, is also in place and maintains its own way of acting. None of these changes as the lens slips along the rule and goes up to the affirmation "The Father and I are one."

What changes is the referent of the word 'I,' that is, the level at which the self locates its ultimate identity. If at any time the sense of identity slips down the scale to the level of obedience or instrumentality, then the statements made at those levels are again correct. If that is where your 'I' is, then those are the proper things for it to say.

The mistake that we want to avoid—according to the argument that I am making—is to assume that 'I' refers to just one referent and then to debate which of the above statements is the correct one: Should we say "I do nothing of myself" or say "Who sees me sees the Father?" This debate drops out of the picture as soon as we give up the assumption that the sense of identity is fixed, that 'I' always means the same.

In order to explain this more clearly and to try to describe a possible alternative to the static 'I' model, let us now go back to the recommendation in the text from St. James that we "look into" the "perfect law . . . of liberty." In "The Living One" I tried to convey a sense of the self as a present-into-future living being, as a kind of energy or creative process. It is not to be restricted to its past

* The Living One: Transcendent Freedom Creates the Future—Cistercian Studies V. XVIII-1983, p. 42-58.

which is its descriptions; all that is "dead." As living, it is in the act of creating the future from moment to moment. But if this living one is not to be identified with the descriptions of its past, then it must be a self that transcends all these descriptions, and that comes to a realization of itself as transcending all the descriptions by practicing the *via negativa* of denying its identification with these limited selves. I take this to be the metaphysical/mystical meaning of "self-denial."

As it looses itself from identification with each of these bonds—the attachments of the body and its passions, the cravings and griefs of the emotional nature, the localization of the self by its relations, roles, and history, its memberships and allegiances, even its taxonomic position according to biology and various schemes of metaphysics—as it "loses" each of these "selves," the praying consciousness "finds itself" more and more at liberty. The more you take off bondage, the freer you become; the more you lose restrictions, the vaster you become. The more you empty yourself of predicates, the more you become full of Being.

When you are perfectly empty of all predicates—including the description of yourself as a "receiver"—then you are intensely full of pure "I am"; and just as this point is reached, it explodes into the creative outpouring energy. "May all of you be and be abundantly!" I do not say this as a theoretical theological or philosophical thesis. I report it as an experience of discovery, and I believe that if you will follow the same path of interior seeking, you will experience it in the same way. You simply persevere in the act of "looking into" the law or principle that makes for perfect liberty, until this creative energy bursts forth at the point where all the lines going back into the center of the self converge.

This is the point at which God is closer to you than "you"—meaning your descriptions—are to yourself, as St. Augustine said. God interrupts in the center of your being, as that fountain of living water that makes you to be. But since God cannot be objectified, cannot be experienced as an object, you have to experience this from the subject side, as if it is your own self-being.

In "The Living One" and other places I have called this energy *irruption spondic*, because it pours out like a sacred libation, and this perfect liberty I have called "creative freedom" because it creates what it loves instead of merely responding to it. Just as the transcendent self does not identify itself with its past, so it does not love other beings for their pasts—whether attractive to it or the reverse. The spondic energy that pours out in creative freedom

is *agape*, the love that moves to the next moment of the beloved's life, with the will that all shall be good for the beloved. It pours itself as living energy into the beloved as a will to good and abundant being for the beloved, and takes up its residence there. This living self identifies itself not by its descriptions, which are all ways of saying "I am I by virtue of being unlike you," but it identifies itself by saying to the beloved, "I am in you and you are in me."

This living self says to all other selves, who are beloveds to it, "Take my life as your food; nourish yourselves by my energies; assimilate my very selfhood so that we may be intermingled." In fact, it says to the beloved, "You and I are one; whoever sees me, sees you and whoever sees you, sees me. Whatever anyone does to you, they do to me; what they do to me, they do to you; what you do, I do; and what I do, you do." (Cf. John 14:9, Matthew 25:40, John 15:20, Matthew 18:18-20, John 14:12). This, in my view, is the metaphysical and mystical meaning of Holy Communion and the central teaching of the sacramental events and Discourse at the Last Supper. It is the casting, like fire on the Earth, of the *agape* which Christian teaching says is the nature of God, and which is the Source that creates the world.

IV

Since the purpose of the spiritual life, according to most traditions, is that we are to enter into union with the Divine Source and Creative Act, or to realize our eternal union with it, we can understand why the work of prayer could be said to be a matter of learning that our "natural face" is this transcendent self that exercises creative freedom by radiating love to all beings. It is the progress toward the realization of this "natural face" in ourselves, and the finding of it as transcendent and radiant and mutually indwelt by and indwelling the Divine Transcendence and Creative Radiance, that marks out the series of ever more radical transformations in our sense of identity that we undergo in the life of prayer.

The first task, clearly, is to detach the sense of identity from the descriptions, from the artificial faces. This does not mean to find *another description* of yourself which would be the correct one. It means to realize that there is *no description of you*. That which is called by your name—your body, your history, your personality, your feelings—none of that is ultimately "you." Whatever is capable of being described and distinguished from other descriptions, all that is to be stripped off, so that the remaining selfhood may be called "naked," as it often is called in mystical literature.

All the ascetical practices recommended to us by the various traditions are designed to produce this effect, that we will stop identifying with our descriptions. This is the meaning of "detachment." Notice that this sense of identity is an internal sense of location or perspective, not a way of standing outside ourselves and looking back on ourselves. It is like knowing where you are by your sense of gravity or sense of posture, or the point of view from which you see. You are to coincide with the subjective act of being conscious, not to reflect on the fact of your being or of your being conscious. You learn it by a kind of practice, as you learn to balance yourself in walking or bicycle riding or swimming. You learn it as you learn to move one muscle without moving the one next to it, as in dancing or playing a musical instrument. You learn it as you learn, under biofeedback training, to produce alpha waves in your brain or to lower your blood pressure. It is a certain subtle sense of where you are or how you are, inside. You may "get the hang of it" suddenly or gradually.

One practice that may be especially important to mention is that all the "pairs of opposites" are to be recognized and treated as polarities of the same limited levels of being. Both pleasure and pain are to be regarded with the same detachment, because they are polarities of the identity sense, "I am the body." Both elation at being praised or being successful and dejection at failure or being reproached or insulted are to be regarded with the same detachment, because they are polarities of the identity sense, "I am my feelings and my personality."

Therefore, in prayer, we are not to blame and berate ourselves, we are not to indulge in feeling guilty, any more than we are to commend ourselves and indulge in feeling complacent, because both indulgences are the same mistake. The mistake is not in our judgment, that we accounted ourselves virtuous when we should have acknowledged some deeper deficiency. The mistake is in identifying ourselves with a level of selfhood on which these feelings make any sense at all, either way.

Now, go back and notice something so as not to misunderstand. The body will continue to experience pleasure and pain and we will continue to try to keep it in neutral as far as we can. The emotional personality will probably continue to vibrate to kind or unkind words and actions, and we will try to pacify it. We will most likely continue to make mistakes and maybe occasionally commit moral wrongs until we have thoroughly learned the new way. And obviously we must exert ourselves to correct and try to

prevent these things. These levels of our being do not drop out of existence as we seek to shift our sense of identity. And we do not drop our responsibility for trying to bring them into their respective beneficial orders, each on its own level.

As we progress, we will not take our pleasures and pains seriously; therefore the desires and the sufferings attached to them will diminish; and when we do not so much identify with our descriptive selves, we will not have the perceptions and motivations that otherwise lead us into moral faults, so they will disappear. But we should not count the improvement on these levels as the achievement of our spiritual goal. From one point of view the improvements are preliminaries to real spiritual attainment, and from another point of view, they are byproducts of it. But they are not the main focus. Therefore, the work of prayer is not to seek these improvements directly but to seek to shift our sense of identity away from the whole type of self-concept that underlies both the undesirable and the desirable experiences — since they are always polarities of the same level of being. And this self-concept is the descriptive self. The descriptive being will still be there; it is not unreal. And we lose none of our responsibility for keeping it in right order. But we do not believe that we are it, we do not experience ourselves as being located there; we do not perceive life as if we are looking out from that point of view. And it is because we do not identify ourselves with the descriptive being we will be in a much better position to regulate it, to bring it into the natural harmony in which it should operate.

How do we go about trying to shift our sense of identity? There are two ways: prayer or meditation or contemplation, and the practices of everyday life. I have already mentioned the ascetical practices, which are supposed to help us to see through our mistakes, identification of ourselves with the levels of bodily and emotional experience. And I have mentioned that prayer should not be a matter of moral evaluation of our lives. Moral reflection is a good thing and should be done, but it is not *per se* a spiritual practice and should not be confused with the proper work of prayer. The proper work of prayer is an effort to experience ourselves being "I" without being any of the descriptions.

There are, of course, many ways of approaching prayer in practice. I will describe only two. One is a way I think I will call the "hodos method." In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The word for "way" is "hodos" "road." As I have experienced it, it means that Jesus himself

comes a road or a passage. It seems to work like this: One begins with an ordinary meditation on almost any gospel event. You can watch it as an outsider until it becomes vivid, then enter into it as one of the characters in the scene. It is especially helpful to enter into the role of someone who is interacting with Jesus. In this practice, the prayer gradually shifts from discursive to non-discursive as one finally settles on the chief focus of the event and holds that bit steadily before one.

I like to use as an example of this prayer the story of the leper who presented himself before Jesus with the declaration "You only have to will it and you can make me clean." Jesus touched him and said, "I do will it: Be clean." (Matthew 8:2-3.) The one who mediates on this event becomes the leper and experiences the interaction with Jesus. You first experience the conviction of the leper that the will of Jesus can heal, then you feel the touch of Jesus' hand and hear his words. At this point the scene holds, and the words are repeated again and again.

Then, what may happen is that you will find that by repeating the words over and over, you have slipped out of being the leper and are being Jesus. This is a startling and powerful experience, because now you look out on the world through his eyes, see the leper before you, and feel the enormous power of Jesus' will to heal flowing through you, out to that person.

In this experience you may begin to realize that what you had thought of as different identities have all telescoped, but can be traced back, as if you are tracking a stream to its source. There is the human personality of Jesus and his natural concern for a fellow being. But inside this is the vast will of the Incarnate Divine Word through whom all creation takes place. This will seems to blow through, or shine through, or pour through, or beam through the human personality like a giant laser. And even inside or behind this is the absolutely invisible Source of being itself.

In the mediator's position of identification with Jesus in this scene, all these experiences have to pass *through* the one who prays. They have to be experienced from the inside, not regarded, however worshipfully, from the outside. As the layers of identity in Jesus reveal themselves, deeper and deeper, the mediator's sense of identity has to shift with them, carried by the prayer. The reality of Jesus thus acts as a passage or a road from the phenomenal world of descriptive being back into the heart of the Godhead. The mediator can begin with any experience in the life of Jesus, and by entering into Jesus' sense of his own identity, beginning

from his action or his words and passing to his intention and his feeling, and so back into his sense of selfhood, come into the experience of union with God.

Another way of praying that is being talked about now is called "centering." There are variations on this, too, so I will give you my version. One attempts in this prayer to situate one's sense of spiritual gravity at the very center of one's being, at the point which cannot be described by any predicates, which therefore literally cannot be conceived because no concept is adequate to it. In this sense it cannot be "known" or be "thought." One approaches it rather by "unknowing." But you can be conscious in it because it is the source of consciousness. You do not become unaware of conscious in the sense of becoming unconscious or unaware of being conscious. But you stop looking at what you call "yourself" as if it were an object, as if you could "look at" it. You can only coincide consciously with it. All the sense of consciousness pulls in, as it were, and concentrates itself on the focal point of self-being at the center of the soul.

If this is done correctly, it is something like a solar eclipse. All the ordinary lights that we are used to are gradually blotted out until it seems that everything that we had known to be ourself is gone. And just as everything is disappearing into this darkness, the crown of light, the corona, bursts forth with breathtaking beauty. Just at the moment when we concentrate ourselves in the purity of the sheer zero of spiritual emptiness, it explodes into the cosmic radiance of love.

In this discovery of one's original, natural face, the true self at the center of one's descriptive being, one realizes union with God, who is Original Agape. One's being is united with God's being, which is the eternal and continuous act of creative freedom, willing abundant being to all. And thus one's will is united with God's will, as being the same kind of will and the same act of will, a creative freedom that enters into all beings and dwells with them, projecting spiritual energies toward and into them that they also may be creative beings.

V

It may be that here a very curious thing happens. The whole sense of what identity itself means comes into question. Not only does the sense of identity shift from what I have called the artificial faces, or the descriptive levels of being, to the natural face, the transcendent self, but it is not clear how to distinguish this trans-

endent self from the Divine Being, for both are undescrivable acts of outpouring love, and both find their identity precisely by their indwelling of what we—from our descriptive point of view—would call “other” beings.

St. Teresa of Avila likened her experience of the divine union to sunlight pouring through two windows into the same room. Inside the room it is all one light. I think this is a good image. I was going to suggest the metaphor of “confluence.” I think of life, or self-being, as a kind of flow or beam of energy. And *agape*, which is in the spiritual order the means of identification, is the flowing or bearing of one stream into another, so that the two are then both two and one.

This is another case of an assumption that must be abandoned. In the light of what we understand about the Trinity we cannot ask ourselves whether we are “the same as” God or another being, or whether we are “different from” and “separate from” that other. These are not the right questions; there is no satisfactory way to answer them, in either direction. “Identity” or selfhood is not such a being that “same” and “different” can be applied to it. The peculiar thing about it is that if we are to try to use these concepts of “same” and “different” we shall be obliged to affirm them both and still to say that the “sameness” and the “difference” do not conflict with one another. That is as close as we can get with the categories and the logic derived from material experience. But it is more helpful, in my opinion, to say strongly that these concepts are strictly inapplicable. This alerts us to look for another level of experience.

We are used to thinking of the self—even a self which changes its opinion about, or its experience of, its identity-location—as a single, somehow uniquely identifiable being. But it may not be that simple. If the paradigm of being is the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling of the Divine Persons in one another and the production of their unity out of the intensity of their self-giving to one another, as the Greek theology suggests, then we ourselves must also be like this. It may therefore be that all true persons, transcendent selves, sources of creatively free *agape*, are circles whose centers are ~~nowhere~~ and whose circumferences are everywhere. And thus they may all overlap and interpenetrate each other with an intimacy that we can scarcely imagine, because we think of intimacy and maintenance of individual personhood as inversely proportional. But the revelation of the Divine Being may be precisely this, that it extends the intimacy of its interior life

to all of us and that in fact this is the only way in which it is possible for a spiritual being to exist. This may be what the mystery of the Trinity is meant to tell us.

The whole question of unique “identity” at all—the identity that is “mine,” or “yours”—may disappear because “my” identity is “your” identity is “Christ’s” identity, is God’s identity. There is an “I” but it is not the “I” that had formerly been meant when “I” was said; rather, where “I” is said, one could now as well say “Christ.” (Cf. Galatians 2:20.) And finally, God is all in all. (1 Cor. 15:28.)

Some utterances in spiritual literature cannot be understood except from the point of view of the experience that gave rise to the utterance in the first place. Outside that experience, these sayings appear incorrect, or arrogant, or oversimplified, as if proper account had not been taken of the structure of the world. And indeed, if one says “I” meaning the descriptive being, then the statements made by mystics are incorrect. They only become correct when attributed to the realm of the transcendent self, in which such intermingling and confluence of identities is possible, and perhaps necessary.

In conclusion, let me just point to a last idea deriving from the passage from St. James. As the prayer life reaches some degree of realization in the course of this looking into the law of liberty the mediator begins to be able to be a “doer of the word,” and not merely a hearer. One begins to be able really to love all other beings as one’s self. This is simply not possible before one remembers and identifies with one’s “natural face,” the central self in which God’s *agape* is the source of life. But the closer one approaches to this realization, this transformation in the sense of identity, the more one will be able actually to do the divine act of radiating being and love-energy to all beings of the world.

This is when “spiritual life” in the true sense begins. All the work of prayer in order to reach that point was not really “spiritual life,” although we call it that because it is concerned with the spiritual life. It is only after we have “looked into”—gazed upon and grasped—“the perfect law, the law of liberty,” and after we have “persevered,” that we become, not hearers who forget but doers who act, and then we are blessed in our doing.