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The Grace of Unknowing

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"Woven together in love"

A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life

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Saturday South Bronx Noon

by Harold J. Recinos

two o'clock sabado afternoon
the streets have been still all
morning but now the faces begin pouring

like rain out of buildings onto the
avenue for a day of labor or getting
over on each other. nothing has changed

in this place where the living sigh
of dying years on end. they say the Ricans
once had jobs but work now cannot be

found that the factories have left
to starve latinos on penny-wages just
South of the border. dark is the language

of the streets where the churches have
erected heaven on promises never kept
and gates placed on building steps to keep

the junkies out. terror is the language
of the day the cops body dropped Bobby
on the corner that marks the grieving of

his wife. sabado afternoon and the workers,
those still employed downtown, are thinking
about pushing coat racks along seventh avenue

next week wondering about the meaning
of opportunity in the land of freedom
that grows sugarcane so bitter today.

From *Jesus Weeps: Global Encounters on Our Doorstep* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 41. Used with permission.

The Grace of Unknowing

by Douglas Burton-Christie

“She changed her mind.”

I knew immediately what these words meant: James would not be coming to live with us. I tried to respond to the caller, but could not speak. Finally, before the waves of grief and tears engulfed me, I thanked her for calling and hung up the phone.



IT WASN'T SUPPOSED to happen this way. That night my wife Mary Ellen and I had gone out to dinner to celebrate—our “last supper” we called it, for we knew that with an infant coming into our lives we would not be enjoying many quiet evenings together for a long time. The day before, we had been present at his birth, an astounding, humbling experience. We gave him his first bath, carefully sponging his fragile, tender body with our awkward hands. He was beautiful, perfect. We fed him, rocked him, spoke softly into his ears of all that was to come—the house where he would live, all the people waiting to meet him, the roses blooming in the garden, the deep green grass and bright chalk lines of the Oakland Coliseum where we would soon take him to his first major league baseball game. It had finally happened: we were going to be parents. Later that day, we drove home to make final preparations, our heads spinning with excitement: we would be returning the next day to bring our new child home.

Then came the phone call and a curtain of dull grief descended. The hope and buoyancy we had felt earlier that day drained away. Perhaps, I think, now, I could have been stronger. I could have found some good in it, some reason for this utterly unexpected turn of events. But I could not. I remember only that I felt lost, utterly lost. There was no answer for this, no recourse, nothing I could do. The sensation I felt most acutely was this: there was no place I could go to escape this loss. For that is what I wanted more than anything else, to be taken someplace where I would no longer have to remember what had happened.

It was a very long night.

I have been thinking a lot lately about what it means to be caught up in circumstances over which you have no control. About the illusion of control and the gradual, grudging awareness of how much it costs to relinquish it. And I have been drawn to consider again how the mystics speak of darkness, the way of unknowing. I remember my first encounter many years ago with the writings of St. John of the Cross. The image of the spiritual life presented in his “Dark Night of the Soul” enthralled me: “One dark night/Fired with love’s urgent longings/—Ah, the sheer grace!—I went out unseen, My house being all stilled.”¹ Reading through this haunting poem, I grasped the idea that the experience of purgation was somehow necessary to the soul’s deepening knowledge

¹ *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1973), p. 295.

of God. I gathered that there would be a period of privation in which the ego was stripped of unnecessary attachments, allowing one to love God fully. But I had no frame of reference for this idea, no real experience of purgation in my own life. Nor did I hear these ominous lines: “He wounded my neck with his gentle hand.” Because of this, I felt the sweet seduction of the idea of the dark night without sensing its terror. I suppose I envisioned it something like the “Tunnel of Love” ride at the fair: the plunge into darkness (thrilling and just a little bit scary), a few surprises along the way and the assurance that you would be delivered safely out the other end after a few minutes: a grand adventure rather than a mysterious journey into an abyss. I had no grasp of the cost involved in entering into such a night, no sense of how it might feel to be bereft of all support, completely adrift.

I am still not sure how well I understand John of the Cross’s magnificent poem, nor how my experience corresponds to the struggle of which he speaks. But something has changed in me, giving the symbol of darkness much deeper resonance: the past five years have brought waves of long nights, leaving me less sure of my bearings, less willing to assume I know where things are going. With this uncertainty have come new questions—about my willingness to live with the precarious, unpredictable character of events that unfold before me, about my capacity to believe and trust in God’s goodness, and about the sources of hope in my life.

LIVING WITH THE UNPREDICTABLE

PERHAPS THE REASON losing James hurt so deeply was that we had already endured so many other losses. Adoption represented for Mary Ellen and me the far side of a long, painful struggle to have a child. What we had imagined innocently would be a simple and natural process had gradually grown into a tangled thicket of complications and impediments over which we had little control. We had no sense of a pattern in these events, no awareness of where things were going. Rather, a sense of disintegration pervaded the entire process. Nor at the time did we know anyone else who had suffered through this. We have since the early days of this process come to know many other couples who have struggled through this experience. But in the beginning we were alone with our questions and doubts.

Initially we thought it would just be a matter of time until

Who
among us is
ever ready
for what
comes?

we conceived a child. But as the months passed, it became clear that something was wrong. We found ourselves increasingly occupied with calculations and measurements: we studied temperature charts, trying to discern the patterns revealing the time of ovulation. We performed “chemistry experiments” with ovulation prediction kits. Gradually our bedroom was transformed into a laboratory. We became acutely aware of time: always the same intrusive chronological question insinuated itself into the intimate moment of love making: is this the right time of the month? If a particular shade of blue appeared on the ovulation predictor, then we knew we were within the optimum range for conception. But we never *really* knew. The chemical tab could only tell us so much. Ultimately it told us very little.

Still, this was not so bad: “Trying, that’s the fun part,” a friend said to me at the time, laughing. Yes, in a way it was. But a growing tension gradually entered into our love-making. As the need to abide by a strict temporal imperative increased, spontaneous intimacy between us became more elusive. And we became focused solely on “results.” After “trying” began the vigil: maybe this time it would work. Initially we waited with eager anticipation for the hoped-for news. But months came and went with the same result: nothing. After a while, I stopped asking Mary Ellen about it. Then, I stopped thinking about it, or tried to. I was losing heart and it hurt too much to consider what this might mean. Putting it out of my mind seemed the surest way to protect myself.

Finally, we consulted doctors. There was a long series of tests, many more for Mary Ellen than for me. But the results were all inconclusive. Then drug therapy. Still nothing happened. Eventually, as a last resort, surgery was suggested—a laparoscopy to explore Mary Ellen’s fallopian tubes for signs of trouble. This was not a pleasant prospect for Mary Ellen, nor was it a sure thing. But it was the next step in this unfolding process, one which our doctor assured us often solved the problem of infertility. She decided to have the procedure and we allowed ourselves to hope again. Again, however, the results were inconclusive. And, as before, we still were unable to conceive a child. Once again, we were at the beginning. Or, rather, we were at the end of the road.

We considered other, expensive and even more invasive, medical intervention but decided against it, mainly because we were utterly exhausted. Mary Ellen especially had borne the brunt of a seem-

ingly endless round of tests, drugs, and surgery. But both of us had reached the end of our capacity to keep investing hope in this precarious medical process. It had become a cruel parade of negations. Every step had promised so much but had ultimately yielded nothing. And we were powerless to do anything about it.

That, I think, was the most frustrating, unnerving, and disheartening part of the whole process: there was nothing we could do to change what was happening to us. This was supposed to be something *we did*: we make love and conceive a child. Yet the most significant action was what was *not* happening. I simply had to accept that we could not control this process. But that is not easy, especially when what you are being asked to relinquish is so dear to you. I was haunted by a terrible question I did not want to face: was it really possible that we would never have children? For a long time, I could hardly acknowledge this question. The loss was more than I could fathom. But, I reasoned with myself, I could learn to live with this. Many other people did. This was a feeble and wholly unconvincing attempt to put this loss behind me. I realized that I was being hit precisely where I was most vulnerable. There were many things I would have given up, easily, gladly, but this was not one of them. For one thing I could see no point in having to give it up. What reason could possibly be given for such a relinquishment? But most important, at precisely the moment it was slipping from my grasp, I realized how long I cherished the dream of having a child. I had simply assumed that sooner or later, when the time was ripe, it would happen. That no longer seemed likely.

TRUSTING IN GOD

WHEN WE FINALLY decided to pursue adoption, it came as the final step in a long series of relinquishments: we would not be having our own child. Again and again, we had been forced to give up yet another expectation, another idea of how things would be; the very notion that we had some control over the process. Gradually we reconciled ourselves to these realities. We came to see adoption as a hopeful, positive response to our situation, a chance for a new beginning. This would be *our* way, not the way we had dreamed or expected, but our own way of having a child. Moving forward in this process also meant opening ourselves again to hoping, believing that it could happen. That in itself was not easy. Something had to thaw,

break loose before this would be possible. To our surprise, some of the bitterness and the hurt did slowly ebb. As the prospect of adoption grew closer, we found ourselves beginning to believe that this could really happen. Then, unexpectedly, a strange thing happened: we cast care completely to the wind. We gave ourselves over to it with wild abandon. We believed completely.

There had always been a possibility that the birth mother would change her mind. We knew that. But during the several months we had come to know her, we had seen nothing to

I remember only that I felt utterly lost make us believe it would happen. She had thought about it carefully and was sure of her decision. In the weeks leading up to the birth, we had grown close to her, sharing with her our dreams for the life of this child and listening to her describe the life she saw stretching out before her after the child was born. We became fond of one another. This was one aspect of the open-adoption process that we appreciated the most: no veil of secrecy would fall between birth mother and child. He would not grow up wondering who his “real” mother was. We would not have to worry about a mysterious stranger appearing at our doorstep years later. Then he was born and she changed her mind.

All I knew at that moment was raw grief. And rage. Hurt more than anything else. Hurt that I had trusted so completely, that I had been duped into believing that such happiness could actually be mine. Initially my anger was directed toward the birth mother: she had misled us, been dishonest, or at least careless. But I knew that was not really true. The feelings that welled up within her at the birth of her child had caught her completely by surprise. Somehow they had remained buried until the moment of birth. Now she was responding honestly and naturally to the child she had brought into the world. She simply could not let him go. And I could not blame her for that. Even in that first moment, when we knew our dream had collapsed, I felt an unexpected gratitude that she had wakened to her feelings for her child in those first moments after the birth. Had she come to this realization later, it would have been much more difficult and painful to do anything about it. Still, this did little to fill the void that I felt.

If I was not angry with her, then with whom? God? The universe in which things like this were allowed to happen? I am not sure. All I know is that I felt betrayed. This seemed unnecessarily cruel and utterly unfair. Hadn't I already relinquished enough?

Hadn't I opened myself again and again to the unexpected, finding room within myself for a series of events that I neither wished for nor welcomed? I could not make any sense of what was happening to me.

Out of this confusion emerged new questions of faith. Or rather, questions I had been asking myself all along now took on new weight: How do you learn to trust again, allow yourself to become vulnerable when it feels as if your trust has been betrayed? Where do you stand when the ground beneath your feet has become unstable? I was confronting within myself an idea about God that I suspect was yet another product of my desire to control the circumstances of my life, to keep from having to venture out into unknown waters. This God was predictable, responsive to my desires, and above all safe, if only I maintained my posture of faithfulness. I began to see that I had reduced God to an object; I had lost sight of the God who is intimate, mysterious beckoning presence living and moving through the unknown depths of my life. Now I was being asked to risk believing, to venture out, as Kierkegaard suggested, “upon the seventy thousand fathoms of water,” to find God even within these painful events. Under the circumstances, these questions had a practical urgency for me. I knew if I were going to continue the search for a child, I would have to reorient myself, either resolving these questions or learning to live in their shadow without bitterness. I sensed I was being asked again to open myself, to trust in a process utterly beyond my control or understanding. At that moment, I honestly did not know whether I could do this.

SOURCES OF HOPE

DURING THIS TIME I began to notice things that I hadn't seen before. I found myself listening more carefully to others' stories of pain and loss and responding more genuinely. And as I looked around me, I was surprised to find how much hurt there was. It was everywhere. How had I not seen this before? Had I really been so aloof, so callous? I had not consciously ignored the suffering of those around me. But neither had I been able to enter into their experience with much feeling of real compassion. Now, in the wake of the confusion and loss of these past months, some barely perceptible but powerful movement within me was slowly altering this pattern. An easy confidence was being succeeded by an acute attentiveness to the predicaments of others.

And with this came a new honesty and sense of freedom.

When I speak of honesty, I mean first a certain openness, a willingness to be honest with others about myself and the struggles that fill my life. This kind of openness has always been hard for me. For as long as I can remember, I have felt it best to keep my problems to myself, to exercise great caution in sharing my struggles with others. In a way that is perfectly natural. But what has tended to happen is this: privacy has become a strategy for protecting myself, for precluding engagement with others on anything other than my own terms. I have come to see this as a lack of trust, a kind of faithlessness. What is true of human relationships has also been true of my relationship with God. How can you come to know someone unless you are willing to reveal yourself? It seems so simple. But, as I was beginning to learn, the desire for intimacy must be cultivated or it will be completely overwhelmed by the passion for safety and control.

Honesty also means cultivating the courage to face whatever life presents you with, what Jon Sobrino means when he speaks of “honesty to the real.” I have never thought of myself as a particularly courageous person. I don’t know many people who do. We hope that when the important challenges in our lives arise, we will have the courage to face them with honesty and dignity. Secretly, perhaps, we hope we won’t be tested—at least not before we are ready. But who among us is ever ready for what comes? Aren’t we almost always caught by surprise by what happens to us? Honesty here means not flinching from the full weight of reality as it comes, not explaining it away before it has been absorbed and above all, not fleeing. There may be no answer forthcoming and precious little solace. Being “honest to the real” means somehow learning to live within reality as it is given, trusting that what you need will come. Nor is this only a matter of grudging, teeth-gritting resignation to grim reality. There is something else: I found that opening myself to such honesty led to a palpable, exhilarating release from fear.

For what else lies behind the lack of honesty I have been describing than fear? That self-disclosure will lead to humiliation. That trusting in reality as it comes to us may leave us grievously hurt. Better to play it safe all the way around. Which is why something usually has to happen to us before we can learn to be honest. At least this was true for me. The cascade of frustrations and disappointments that washed over me during the struggle to have a child had been utterly unexpected. I never imagined that my way

of purgation would come in this manner, nor that the stripping would cut so deeply. I certainly never would have chosen this way. But this, I am learning, is part of how change happens, how God breaches our fear of the unknown. I had seen my worst fears realized, had the props behind my carefully constructed facade of well-being knocked loose. And in the process, I was brought face to face with myself, others, and God, shorn of my usual coping devices. While I may have come reluctantly to this honesty, I was gradually learning to accept, even embrace this ebbing of fear from my life, this dawning of freedom.

THE WAY OF UNKNOWING

I WAS NO MORE prepared for the second phone call than I had been for the first one. Nor in the months that have followed, have I been able to comprehend the meaning of this most recent event. I had only begun learning how to relinquish my illusion of control, how to take my first tentative steps along this new way, how to live in the mystery of my unfolding life. No expectations. No plans. Just live. Then the word came: a baby girl.

Julia Rose is asleep in the other room now. I do not know how this happened, how she came to be here. That, I realize, is one of the ironies of this whole process: her mysterious arrival is also about unknowing, about all that lies hidden in the darkness waiting to emerge into the light of day. She teaches me daily about the way of unknowing. Her life is blossoming, shaped by our love but also following its own mysterious course. Even now I can sense how much it will cost me to let her go her own way. But that is all to come. For now I am enjoying her endless curiosity and unstinting laughter and learning from her insouciance. I am also learning, as I did on that day when my arms first enveloped her tiny body, to drink in the mysterious grace of unknowing:

*Breathing softly, arched eyebrows
Suddenly frowning, then a cry
for me? You stretch out a tiny hand
gripping hard my finger,
like a tree trunk to you.
Where did you come from? How
can you be here in my arms?
Now I brush your soft, dark hair
and give you my heart.*