

ON THE SPIRIT OF SMALL THINGS

Sheri Ritchlin

Over the years, I have come to think of spirituality as an intimacy with the universe. Isn't that, after all, what the relationship between God and the human has always been about? God--as the creator/presence of the whole vast universe? In our busy-ness to parse the theological fine points, we overlook the sheer audacity of this; fail to wonder why the human seems so hard-wired for so illogical a thing. But it is true: The universe itself--sun, moon, stars, planets and "all things under heaven"--comes to us with a numinous quality and awakens us in our inmost depths with the tenderness of a lover. We think of it as something infinitely larger than ourselves, whether we receive it as beauty, a dazzling light, Nirvana, or the presence of God. Such an experience alters the humdrum of daily life. Creates a nimbus around it and makes it holy.

That's what I look for: the holiness--allied as it is with beauty, with love, with grace, in the many meanings of that word. When it is present, my toothbrush is holy, my cup is holy, my plate--even to the checkbook that dispenses my meager funds. Equally, a moment may come (often after a shamefully long interim) when I look around and see that it has slipped away and I am left with--well--just a toothbrush. An ordinary one. A cup without presence. And a check-book that simply makes me feel low-balanced and impoverished. I notice that the geese have been passing overhead unsaluted. Birds have sung their tiny hearts out to the dawn unlistened to. A night wind has sougled through the trees, a bright Venus has convoyed a crescent moon over the mountain, and the moon has waxed to a gigantic fullness yet again. All unnoticed by me because I let the holiness slip away and holiness is a thing I make with the universe by simply, as an ancient Chinese sage-king put it, "receiving as a guest the morning sun." It is an act of mutual presence: the holy task and gift bestowed, according to present knowledge, only upon Earthlings.

Intimacy with the universe: How extraordinary that there is a creature who lies in the dark, or even kneels there, and calls upon the Master Force of the Universe, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, to heal wounds, forgive sins, deliver a heart's desire. Watch the bees in a hive, the ants in a mound, the blackbirds in a flock and try to imagine that each one, in its small body, is carrying a prayer, a hope, a hymn to the creator. Before you dismiss this as absurd, imagine that your world is in a 747 and that you live at 20,000 to 30,000 feet above the earth and this is all you know. Could you guess that there are minute creatures below you, invisible in the folds of landscape and along pencil-thin highways who are earnestly conversing with a cosmic power? This is the great mystery that we accept without question, even as we sort out the logic of small questions. And who knows what the bees are humming or why the birds sing to the dawn?

For many people, perhaps most, the thought of intergalactic spaces is cold, impersonal and intimidating, and so its Creator--its vast unifying force, its "organizing principle"--comes as the comfort of the father for a child, or the mother for the suckling babe, or the shepherd for the sheep, even the lost sheep or the most vulnerable lamb. The Divine always comes as the Giver of what is precious--the spring that provides nourishing water, the corn that gives life, the Sun that gives warmth and light, the heart that transforms through love.

Life lived consciously is a journey and this conscious journey is always a spiritual one. Religious in the sense of "tying back." That is, we can tie the events of our own lives together as a meaningful story. When we tie that back, it becomes a religious story. A story of origins and connections with numinous creative powers sustained in ritual. Perhaps we don't use the words "spiritual" or "religious" and they are, after all, only words. But there is The Word, spoken softly across light years. There are sacred syllables and songs. Dances to the sacred wonder of the universe. Or just a stillness of being in which mindless gestures become mindful mudras, graceful and reverent. And the cup--ah the dear cup and plate--are once again holy.

January 4, 2009

~With thanks to J.J. Wilson for inviting me to write this piece for the Sitting Room publication, "Spirit Matters."