

The Spacious Heart: Room for Spiritual Awakening

By Donald Clymer and Sharon Clymer Landis

Introduction

Several colleagues and I (Don) were sitting around a table at a Christian university. One of my colleagues went on and on how modest his salary was, and the sacrifice he was making to teach at this university. My mind pictured his lovely country home and large late-model SUV, and I wondered what else he needed. My mind also pictured my friend Ricardo from the rural village in Mexico where I had worked and how he had to scrimp and save just to put decent food on the table.

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I was waiting in line for lunch in the cafeteria of a Christian college. The student in front of me asked a student who was leaving, “What’s for lunch today?” The departing student, with a look of disgust on her face snarled, “the same old sh . . .”

I was at the college for a series of meetings about my work with a mission agency in a rural village in Mexico. I wanted to grab the student and tell her, “I know hundreds of families in our village who would be delighted to eat that . . .”

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A new acquaintance of mine and I were discussing my view of Jesus’ ministry. I said I preferred the description “radical” to “conservative” or “liberal.” I

was at a language school with other missionaries preparing for service in Latin America. Another man who overheard our conversation came up to me and said, “A radical is a liberal is a Communist.” That sort of ended our fine conversation.

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I stood in front of the shelves of breakfast cereal boxes in a supermarket. There were hundreds to choose from. Where my family lived in rural Mexico, our supermarket carried six different cereals: two brands of cornflakes, two brands of bran cereal, one brand of sugar-coated cornflakes, and Wheaties.

I was dumbfounded. I had no idea where to begin in my search for a breakfast cereal. Frustrated, I chose the cornflakes.

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A woman at a nearby table was busily looking at her hands on her lap while I was at an all-day church conference. Her fingers kept dancing over the face of the little instrument she carried in her hand. Occasionally she would look up to listen to the speaker, but she soon returned to her tapping. This went on with a few pauses throughout the day. I wondered what was so important in her life that she couldn't be present to the other people in the room.

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As portrayed in these stories, our culture is overwhelmed. We have too many choices—too many options to fill our time that can leave us stressed out, fearful, lonely and ungrateful. Our culture could use fresh approaches to life and leisure and new ways of experiencing God to help us face these challenges. We

could all benefit by cultivating a mellow and spacious heart, a heart that is open and allows more room for God.

Introduction to the Authors

Sharon and Don are brother and sister, and they grew up in a large family of eleven siblings. Having so many siblings resulted in what appeared to be two different families. Don was in the first half of the family, Sharon in the second. They barely knew each other growing up. Don is male and Sharon is female, and this gives them varying interpretations of what it means to belong to this huge clan. Don was extroverted and easily engaged others while Sharon was shy.

Somehow in midlife, they both became aware of something they had in common: a mystical bent to life. Don discovered his while dealing with the grinding oppression he encountered in Latin America as a mission worker. Sharon didn't have to discover hers; it was always present. She just needed tools to name what she was experiencing. Both received training as spiritual directors without the other knowing it. What fun it was to suddenly discover a new sister and a new brother! Thus began their journey in putting together this book.

Introduction to Don

I first came across the concept of mellowness of heart as an important part of spirituality while reading chapter three of Ronald Rolheiser's seminal work *The Holy Longing* (pp. 43–70).ⁱ He called “mellowness of heart” (pp. 66–70) one

of the “nonnegotiable essentials” of Christian spirituality along with private prayer and morality, social justice, and participation in a community of faith. Three of the essentials made sense to me, and at least two of them seem to be standard expectation in most Christian expressions of faith. The one on social justice is less often included in conservative evangelical expressions of Christian spirituality. On the other hand, the Mennonite/Anabaptist tradition both Sharon and I are a part of has historically recognized social justice as part of the message of Jesus. I have been blessed through much personal experience working with the very poor in Central America and Mexico, so Rolheiser’s inclusion of social justice as part of a healthy spirituality was no surprise.

Mellowness of heart, however, jumped out at me as being quite odd. In spite of our training in spiritual formation, nowhere had either my sister or I encountered this concept. There is little if any reference to such an idea in spiritual formation literature. There is no reference to it in any theological works of which we are aware. In fact, the word “mellowness” cannot even be found in the Bible. 1 Peter 3:8 mentions a “tender heart” (NRSV), as one in a list of qualities for Christians to demonstrate: “Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” This probably comes as close to Rolheiser’s idea as any. So we are left with the question, how could it possibly be a “nonnegotiable essential” of Christian spirituality? Could it be as important a concept as the other three?

Perhaps the fact that the idea was so foreign to me and because of my general curiosity about spiritual formation, I began to let the idea soak in, and I started to read the scripture in a totally different way. At first blush, the word “mellowness” is so counter to the cultural milieu within which both my sister and I were nurtured that we struggled to understand Rolheiser’s idea. First, there is the Protestant work ethic so prevalent in the general culture of the United States. To work hard to get ahead and stay ahead causes more stress than mellowness. Then add the Reformed tradition’s concept of total depravity (see our glossary at the back of the book for theological or other terms related to spirituality that may not be familiar to you) which has seeped consciously or unconsciously into the psyche of those from my Mennonite upbringing through revival and renewal movements of the 50s and 70s if not before. Unfortunately, combating the worminess of our God-given nature is the cause of much more stress and anxiety, producing anything but mellowness.

Finally, the emphasis of my faith tradition on discipleship—a strict following of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount—leads to an emphasis on “perfectionism,” to which no one can ever measure up. Stress, anxiety, and more stress. I found plenty of places in our spiritual heritage as well as practice where mellowness was needed: indeed, mellowness of heart. This is a fairly universal need. As spiritual directors my sister and I have both dealt with spiritually wounded people from many traditions as well as seekers from no

tradition at all. Most of these people could use a more balanced spirituality, especially one that includes the mellowness of heart identified by Rolheiser.

After much reflection on this theme, and after testing several concepts with work groups and in retreats, we came to the conclusion that the concept of mellowness of heart needed further development. Hence, we wrote this book.

Mellowness involves a spacious or open heart. It can be a tender heart—a heart that is receptive to growing understandings of God and spirituality. However we describe it, a person with such a heart is one who is more laid back, more willing to experience God’s presence in all aspects of life.

Introduction to Sharon

I believe God’s love is an experience, not just a comforting theology. It is my hope that the stories shared in the story sections of our book will encourage you to notice, validate, and cherish the gentle way God interacts with you. I offer many stories in this book: my own and those of friends and folks who come to me for spiritual direction. Even when they’ve given me permission, I’ve changed their names and circumstances as their stories really belong to them, and I treat all stories as sacred. I am grateful for their willingness to share the joy and difficulty that is prayer and spiritual growth. May you also seek people and places of safety and begin sharing your God encounters so humanity may collectively experience the richness, depth, abundant love, creativity, and playfulness of God.

Experiencing God: God as a Fountain of Light, Love, Energy (Sharon)

Humanity is awash in God experiences. Like the absurdity of a fish seeking the sea, we seek God and often forget we aren't separated from God. Experiences of God simply are, whether or not we are aware. We sing these lyrics to the song Prayer for Peace, "Christ before us, Christ behind us, Christ under our feet. Christ within us, Christ over us, let all around us be Christ," while remaining blind to God, and afraid. Along with an open heart and eyes to see, we need practice sharing our stories of God. We struggle to find words for our experiences; we fear the cynicism or doubt from others. Yet, I believe stories of God are what sustain and inspire us. Each story reveals a different face of God; when people or groups of people remain silent about their God stories, my view is limited. When stories are shared our collective vision of God is enriched and expanded.

In Romans 8:29, Paul says nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not life or death, not angels or demons, not the present or the future, not height or depth. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, but sometimes the human heart feels unworthy and unable to receive the fullness of God's love. It might be easier to open our heart's door to receive salvation than to receive the lavishness of God's love.

Receiving God's love takes faith that is more heart than mind, more mystery than logic or reason, and thus the God experiences that deeply move us are difficult to put into words. Religious language can be a real deterrent to

people sharing or even wanting God experiences, so I'm learning to use words that are more real for me and more hopeful for others. God becomes Divine Love or Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Life. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Love. Christ for me means Love, and Christ is the very energy that enlivens the whole universe with the energies of love, compassion, creation, birth, suffering, death, regrowth, and resurrection.

Years ago, when I started a more intentional spiritual journey, I began going to a spiritual director. At first, I feared what I would be asked to do or what I might experience. During one session my director asked me how I was experiencing God. After searching for words, I finally told her God felt like a fountain of light, love, and energy flowing over my body and through my soul. I also told her God allows me to have a faucet to control the flow.

“Why do you need to control the flow?”

“I don't know . . . maybe I'd be knocked flat . . . maybe I'd have too much energy . . . or maybe I'm still a little afraid of it.”

“Tell me more about your fear,” she said.

“I'm afraid if I sit under the full flow, I'll become really different, perhaps too spiritual and then I won't relate well to people.”

She thought for a moment, and then said, “You've named this fear so you can hold it up and look at it. I invite you to examine it in the presence of God.” She closed her eyes; I assumed she was inviting me to pray.

I felt anxious and a bit deserted. I didn't want to face God with nothing but my fear. I wished my director would pray with me or for me, but I closed my eyes and quieted myself.

I thought how easy it was to journal my deep thoughts or think my prayers, or allow love to flow from my heart to God. I thought how scary it was to pray with transparency, inviting Christ to sit with me and examine things I didn't understand and feared. Being a visual person, I wondered what my fear might look like, so I asked God for an image.

Instantly, the image of the moon I saw the night before came to mind. The moon was full and vibrant, surrounded by a gentle, golden halo of light. I remembered staring at the moon, sensing some insight forming within me, but I was content to simply drink in the beauty and not force awareness. The memory of the moon felt sacred, as if it were a gift from God.

Suddenly, I felt immersed in a deep, warm, refreshing current. My skin tingled as insight dawned. In the moon, God had given me a vision of love instead of an image of my fear. The moon represented me, and the gentle halo around the moon represented God: God all around me, softly supporting me, sustaining me, inspiring me, holding me, loving me. In my vision, the moon was shining, not God. Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized Holy God was coming to me, purposely and lovingly dimmed, so I would not be overwhelmed.

My fears vanished. This God I can trust and welcome into my deepest self without fear. I can move under the Divine Flow, without the need for control,

because God will never overwhelm me or ask me to be anything other than what I was created to be. I can shine, fully illuminated with God's love, without fearing I'll lose my grip on reality. I sat quietly contemplating God's tenderness, marveling how God must come to each seeker in the exact way they need to receive healing and love.

My director asked me what I was experiencing and I told her.

"So, how does it feel to shine?" she asked, a wide smile on her face.

I had no words, only a wide smile of my own. For the rest of the session we sat in silence, our faces beaming and our souls basking in the presence of Divine Love.

ⁱ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (City: Image, 2009), pp. 66–70