

Second Stage: The Illuminative Way

Self-Transcendence and Sacramental Existence

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A. Introduction

Today, we continue our series on the three stages of spiritual growth.

The first stage is *the Way of Purgation*. Purgation refers to getting rid of habits and behaviors that harm us and others, that distort the image of God, that make us miserable and unhappy.

The second stage is *the Way of Illumination*. Illumination refers to *realizing* Christ within. After purging ourselves of bad attitudes and habits, after substantially relinquishing our false self or narcissistic ego, we can “see” more clearly. We experience “enlightenment” or “illumination”.

Today, I will review the Illuminative Way and highlight what I think are two essential aspects: Self-Transcendence and Sacramental Existence.

B. The Experience of the Illuminative Way

According to Benedict Groeschel (*Spiritual Passages*), the illuminative way does not refer to a momentary “peak experience” or a one-off enlightenment experience.¹

Rather, it refers to a sustained state in which—for the follower of Christ—it is easier:

- to relinquish security, sensation, and power attachments,
- to pray,
- to remain at peace when *inner* or *outer* turmoil arises,
- to manifest the fruit of the Spirit,
- to see the presence of God in all people and events,
- to experience God’s unconditional love and to express *that* love to others

Those who have never started the spiritual journey, will probably dismiss this as nonsense. But for those who have started the spiritual journey, and especially those struggling in the

¹ Benedict J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 138-39.

purgative way, who have periodically experienced moments of the illuminative life, know that a sustained state of illumination is not beyond possibility.

I believe there are two essential aspects of the Illuminative experience:

- An awareness of "self-transcendence"
- An awareness of "sacramental existence"

C. The Awareness of "Self-Transcendence"

First, let's look at "self-transcendence."

1. Transcendence

When we speak about God, we talk about God as transcendent. God is beyond, or outside of, the ordinary range of human experience and understanding. God is transcendent, but we never speak of God's self-transcendence. It is not possible for God to transcend him/herself. God is Subject and cannot be objectified.

a. Transcending one's self

In contrast to God, we can experience ourselves as both subject and object.

On the one hand, I can look at myself as an object. I can measure my height, weight, and IQ. I can take a personality inventory and I can look at a picture of my brain after a brain scan. I can gather a myriad other objective details about myself. All of these objective details are open to public observation.

On the other hand, I can experience myself as a subject. Only I have access to my inner self-awareness. Only I know what it is like to experience my unique personality. Only I have knowledge what I am thinking, feeling, and desiring. While others may scan my brain and show me a picture of it, only I have access to my mind. This is a private, subjective experience.

There is one more thing. I can view my subjective experience objectively. I can step back and observe what I am thinking, feeling, and desiring. I can watch my own subjective experience (the "witnessing state"). This is a moment of self-transcendence. I observe my own subjective experience as an object!

b. Transcending the world

Our bodily existence reminds us that we belong with all other creatures. We belong to the nature order of this world. We, like other creatures, cannot escape the laws of

physics or chemistry. We cannot escape our genetics. Like other creatures, we experience weakness and finitude.

At the same time, we do not experience life the same way as other animals. "Although we are in the world with them, we are aware of this fact in a way that indicates our transcendence of the world."²

Because we are able to transcend ourselves and the world to some extent, we don't feel entirely at home in this world. Because "the self that stands outside itself and the world cannot find the meaning of life in the world."³

The point is: The Illuminative Way includes the capacity to transcend both ourselves and the world; thus we long for meaning beyond ourselves and this world.

2. Image of God as Transcendence

Our ability to experience self-transcendence is linked to the fact that we are created in the image of God. If you recall, in a sermon a few weeks ago, I proposed that the "image of God" referred to three aspects or abilities unique to humans.⁴

a. Ability to respond freely to God (transcending nature)

One aspect of the image of God is the ability to respond freely to God. Only humans respond to the Word of God.

All creatures act in a way that fits their nature. Rocks roll down hills (cause-and-effect of nature). Animals react to stimuli (instincts built into nature). But neither rocks nor animals respond to the Word of God. Only humans can respond to the Word of God.

I use the term "Word" metaphorically to mean anytime we sense God's address to us—through Christ, scripture, preaching, meditation, or mystical encounter.

Responding to the Word of God is an act differing from all other acts. I experience it as coming from within and, at the same time, I experience it as something originating outside and beyond myself.

² Paul K. Jewett, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 60.

³ Paraphrasing Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, by Jewett, *Who We Are* (1996) 60, n. 41.

⁴ See "Sin as Addiction and Distortion of the Divine Image" at <http://www.mcswichita.net/sermons.htm>. For my understand of the divine image, I have drawn on the work of Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Second Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 142-154.

The point is: When we experience the image of God as our capacity to respond freely to God, we transcend the natural world. That is faith.

b. Capacity to live in community (transcending isolation)

Another aspect of the image of God is the capacity to live in community. This is the capacity to transcend the world of animals and live in a unique I-Thou relationships with God and neighbor, which is distinct from I-It relationships.⁵

I-Thou relationships are subject-subject relationships. "Thou" refers to subjects or persons who are ends in themselves, not means to some other end or something to be used or manipulated for our own purposes. In an I-Thou relationship we treat others as persons. In an I-It relationship there is mutuality, reciprocity, unity together.

I-It relationships are subject-object relationships. "It" refers to objects or things that can be used, manipulated, and ignored. In an I-It relationship we related to things, including other people, as objects, not as persons.

A subject or person only becomes a subject in an I-Thou relationship.

The point is: When we experience the image of God as our capacity to live in I-Thou relationships, we transcend our sense of isolation as an "It", an empty object, and we become a subject-in-relationship, an "I-Thou". That is love.

c. Capability to imagine the divine future (transcending time)

Another aspect of the image of God is the capacity to be open to the divine future. In response to the Word of God, we become open to God's future. By contemplating the future, we can transcend the past. By creative imagination, we anticipate a new future.

The point is: When we experience the image of God as our capability to be open to the divine future, we transcend time and our sense of despair as victims of the past or present. That is hope.

3. Self-Transcendence and Will

The Illuminative Way also involves the awareness that our "will" transcends the cause-and-effect world of nature. We are not completely determined by our genetics, biological functions, or brain processes.

⁵ Martin Buber's book, *I and Thou (Ich und Du, 1923)*.

The will may be defined as “the faculty (power) whereby we translate thought into action through a conscious choice.”⁶

True, we have no control over some things we experience. Our hearts beat. Our lungs inflate. It happens involuntarily as a result of the autonomic nervous system.

Its also true that bodily movement (like raising my hand), which results from the exercise of our will, depends on the central nervous system, which operates according to the same neurochemical laws as the autonomic nervous system.

However, voluntary acts are very different from involuntary ones. In one, I am passive; in the other, I am active.

“To use the traditional language of theology, involuntary acts have to do with the body, voluntary acts with the spirit [or the conscious self]. Will, then, is not a function of the brain; the brain does not choose to do or not to do something—I do.”⁷

The relationship between brain (body) and the mind (our conscious self) is much debated. One book lists sixteen different ways in which philosophers and neuroscientists have envisioned the brain-mind or the brain-soul interaction.⁸

However, one position is becoming more-and-more prominent, a non-materialist view of the mind. On the basis of therapeutic research done with people having Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD),⁹ neuropsychiatrist, Jeffrey Schwartz, writes:

“The time has come for science to confront the serious implications of the fact that directed, willed mental activity can clearly and systematically alter brain function.”¹⁰

Schwartz’s research on treating OCD indicates there is a non-material mind (soul) that transcends the brain (body). The mind (soul/spirit) can alter the brain (body).¹¹

⁶ Jewett, *Who We Are* (1996) 72.

⁷ My italics. Jewett, *Who We Are* (1996) 72.

⁸ Sixteen different theories are listed by Gerald Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *A Universe of Consciousness*, as cited in Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary, *The Spiritual Brain* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 110, including Epiphenomenalism, Eliminative Materialism, Psychophysical Identity Theory, Emergent Mentalism, Substance Dualism, Dualistic Interactionism, etc.

⁹ “Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCS) is a neuropsychiatric disease marked by distressing, intrusive, and unwanted thoughts (obsessions) that trigger an urge to perform ritual behaviors (compulsions).” Beauregard and O’Leary, *The Spiritual Brain* (2007) 127.

¹⁰ Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (New York: HarperCollins, Regan Books, 2002) 54-55, my italics. Schwartz worked with OCD patients and showed that through a process of Relabeling, Reattributing, Reassigning, and Revaluing, OCS brains were altered.

¹¹ “Neuroplasticity (the ability of neurons to shift their connections and responsibilities) makes that possible.” Beauregard and O’Leary, *The Spiritual Brain* (2007) 129.

Schwartz writes: "This was the first study ever to show that cognitive-behavior therapy—or, indeed, any psychiatric treatment that did not rely on drugs—has the power to change faulty brain chemistry in a well-identified brain circuit."¹²

The point is: Modern neuroscience suggests that the mind (soul)—to some degree—transcends the brain (body). This means there is real freedom of the will.

D. The Awareness of "Sacramental Existence"

So, the first essential aspect of the Illuminative Way is the realization of *self-transcendence*. The second aspect, which we turn to now, is the awareness of *sacramental existence*.

1. Perceiving God's Presence

I use the term "sacramental existence" to refer to the awareness of or abiding perception of God's presence in the world and within one's inner being.

A sacrament is a material reality (like bread) or event (like a sun rise) that mediates the power and presence of God. For something to be a sacrament or sacramental, you must experience both the power (grace) and presence (conscious awareness) of God.

If you do not experience divine power, it is not a sacrament. If you do not experience divine presence, it is not a sacrament. You must experience both divine power (grace) and divine presence (awareness) for something to be sacramental.

People living in the illuminative way are able to experience God's power and presence in themselves, other people, scripture, prayer, nature, and even such things as natural disasters. God's reign is everywhere for those who have eyes to see, for those walking the way of illumination.

2. Experiencing Christ in Communion

Groeschel says, "I would suggest that the illuminated see Christ everywhere and especially in the Eucharist [Communion] because they have perceived Him first in the depth of their own being."¹³

The presence of Christ is universal. However, it is concentrated most significantly in communion (Lord's Supper or Eucharist). There are many different theories regarding what happens during the communion—transubstantiation,

¹² Schwartz, *The Mind and the Brain* (2002) 90.

¹³ Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (1995) 142.

consubstantiation, real presence, symbolic action, memorial. The theories are important, but in my mind secondary to the reality of Christ's presence.

3. Beholding the World as Sacred

"For primitive people, the world was sacred often because it was dangerous."¹⁴ For many modern people, the world is a candy store to be robbed, exploited, and polluted.

However, for the person living in the Illuminative Way, "the world regains its original character as the first great book and revelation of God."¹⁵

Those walking in the Illuminative Way are intuitively environmentalists.¹⁶ I cannot imagine someone in the Illuminative Way despoiling the environment or lacking sensitivity to its beauty, since the world of nature is the first voice of God.

"For the Christian the sacramental world literally reflects Christ."¹⁷

E. Human beings as the "gateway of heaven"

Let's put self-transcendence and sacramental existence together. With the awareness of our "self-transcendence" we see ourselves transcending the world—*going heavenward* as it were. In contrast, the awareness of "sacramental existence" we see God entering into and participating with the world—*going earthward* so to speak.

This mirrors the famous statement by St. Athanasius: "God became man so that we might become God."¹⁸ There is divine *descent*. There is human *ascent*.

In the Illuminative Way, there is awareness of *ascent to* the divine and *descent of* the divine. Recall John's Gospel. In John's Gospel, Jesus, who is the Son of Humanity (Man), *descends from* heaven and then later *ascends to* heaven.¹⁹ In a similar way, the children of humanity, you and I, have the capacity to reach for the divine in self-transcendence (*ascent*) and see the divine in sacramental existence (*descent*).

Awareness of the *ascending* and *descending* motif in our own lives is awareness that we are the "Temple of the God's Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:16). In the ancient world of Jesus, the Jewish Temple it was the center of Jewish life. It was regarded as the *axis*

¹⁴ Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (1995) 143.

¹⁵ Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (1995) 143.

¹⁶ Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (1995) 143.

¹⁷ Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (1995) 143.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

¹⁹ The "descent and ascent motif" is very important for understanding Jesus' identity as the Son of Man in the Fourth Gospel (see John 1:51; 3:13-14; 5:27; 6:62; 12:23; 12:34; 13:31).

mundi of the universe, the point of connection between heaven and earth. The Temple was the place where God *descended* to live among his covenant people and, through the daily sacrifices in the Temple, the place where prayers *ascended* to God. The Temple was the gateway of heaven on earth.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, early Christians saw themselves as the New Temple made without hands (Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48-50). With God's Spirit having been poured out on all humanity (Acts 2:17), human beings now have the capacity to be the Temple of God's Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19). Human beings can become the place of divine *ascent* and *descent*, the gateway of heaven on earth.

F. Reflections

In sum, I have argued that the Illuminative Way or stage includes:

1. *Awareness of our self-transcendence* demonstrated by our ability:

- to respond freely to the Word of God,
- to form I-Thou relationships,
- to imagine a divine future,
- to make decisions and take action that transcend biological determinism, where our mind (soul), to some degree, is able to alter brain (body) functions

2. *Awareness of our sacramental existence* demonstrated by our

- Perceiving God everywhere, including our innermost self
- Experiencing Christ in communion
- Beholding the World as sacred

3. *Awareness that we have the capacity to be the gateway of heaven on earth.*