



Everyday Sacred

meditations
and paintings
to inspire
reflection
and prayer

Clarence
Heller

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Meditations and Paintings
to Inspire Reflection and Prayer

Clarence Heller
Artwork by the author

Marjoejess Imprints

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Dedicated to Marilyn, Joe, and Jessica
with special thanks ...

to Marian Cowan, C.S.J., who encouraged
me to paint and to discern,

to the many friends who offered affirmation
and encouragement regarding my prayers,
poems, and reflections,

and to Pat Tovo, without whom
this book would still be only a vision.

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“When you want what you have,
and when you love who you are,
you will desire to give yourself away ...”

Introduction

Love surprised me.

As I was riding home in the backseat of my parents' car with my girlfriend after a warm summer day at the lake, tears welled in my eyes. It was my first experience of true happiness, and my first taste of joy. It was August 1972, and we had been dating for three months. I was sixteen years old. As I reflect back to that time, I realize that the first love poems I wrote, about twelve in all, came during our first year of dating. I would type them on colored paper and in return she would give me one of the ribbons that tied her hair. The poems stopped coming, but the love affair kept growing. Today, Marilyn and I continue to celebrate our life together.

I needed to be loved. As a teenager then and for much of my life afterward, I operated out of a deeply rooted sense of insecurity and inadequacy. I know what it is to be driven to prove yourself even though you are the only one keeping track. I know what it is to be competitive and ambitious, to sacrifice love, family, and relationship with God for the subconscious objective that someday, somehow you will prove you are good enough. Even when I tried to let go of ambition, it found ways to creep back in, and before I real-

ized it I was again working endless hours to achieve more, to be the best I could be. And it was never enough. It never could be enough.

I recall working in a warehouse at a retail store during my high school years. When I started the job, I was one of three people staffing the warehouse on Saturdays. Within a year, I was the only staff person, yet the work load remained the same. In college, I received a 99 percent test score in differential equations when a classmate earned 100 percent. I vowed that “failure” would never be repeated. And I recall with sadness that a few years after completing my masters in business administration while working full time, I noticed a picture of a three-year-old girl hanging in our hallway. I wondered why a photograph of my niece would be in such a prominent place in my home—then realized it was one taken of my daughter while I was busy pursuing that masters degree.

Despite my frequent absence from their lives, my family continued to love me. God continued to love me, and through love comes healing. In my early forties, God began to seduce me, and I surrendered to the invitation. My first tiny yes led to another. The next experience of love led to wanting even more and to being more

open and free to receive it and respond. God is such a great lover. Thank you, God.

At the age of forty-five, I wanted to change my life, and I decided to retire and study theology. I had always been Roman Catholic, learning from the School Sisters of Notre Dame in elementary school and the Brothers of Mary in high school. I attended church most Sundays, but it meant very little. Honestly, I did not know it could mean more than it did then.

During my first year at Aquinas Institute of Theology, I began receiving the counsel of a spiritual director (thank you, Madeleine and Marian) and participated in *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (the Nineteenth Annotation). My life changed profoundly. I came to have a personal relationship with Jesus, and my healing took a leap forward. It was as though I had embarked upon a very important journey home, one long overdue.

One prayer technique we employ in *The Exercises* invites God to use our memory and imagination to help us enter into one of the stories in the Gospels, in a very personal way. One day I prayed with the post-resurrection scene in which Peter and his companions fish while Jesus stands, unrecognized, on the beach (John 21:1–14). In the prayer, I took on the role of Peter. We followed Jesus' instructions to cast the net on the other side of the boat, and it soon overflowed with fish. Immediately I realized the man giving instruction was Jesus, jumped in, and swam ashore. As we

collected the great catch (“153 large fish”) I noticed something peculiar about these particular fish. In my prayer, the fish were indeed large, each weighing perhaps twenty-five pounds, and they were brilliantly colored in a range of hues. But their most spectacular feature was that they smiled broadly, very happily.

“What should I do with these fish?” I asked Jesus.

He replied, “Throw them back so that they can tell the others.”

“Telling the others” is what this book is about. It is what my life is about, and it is what I understand Jesus' mission to be about—helping others come to know that they are deeply and unconditionally loved.

Four years after my colorful prayer, I graduated with a masters in pastoral studies (emphasis in adult Christian formation) and a certificate in spiritual direction. Both of these paved my way to assist adults in entering more deeply into a relationship with God.

On July 24, 2003, during prayer—now two years after I retired—my urge to write poetry returned. Love surprised me again. I had spent the day walking the streets of Wellston, a municipality at the edge of the St. Louis city limits, a neighborhood of those less privileged. I had been going door to door informing residents how they could arrange to have their children transferred for free to a higher-quality school system. Again, the seduction continued with a small opening that led to more. This is the poem I wrote:

Wellston

Sore knuckles, sweaty brow,
Trying to love, but not sure how,
But it isn't how or when or where,
It is in the trying that people know I care.

Since then, more than three hundred meditations (poems and reflections) and a hundred paintings have come to me. But I am not so much an author or artist as I am a pray-er. Before beginning each painting I surrender all of myself to God (body, mind, spirit, emotions, will, intellect, imagination, subconscious, and whatever else of me there is) and ask God to say to me whatever God wishes through the painting. I ask to be able to tell God what is deep inside myself through the painting. I use my nondominant hand to finger paint, with the hope of letting go even further any perceived control I may have. And I lose myself. It is a process of nonthinking, nonverbal, emotional, authentic expression in which the colors choose themselves and I am often surprised at what appears on the paper. It is a being and doing with God.

The process of writing also occurs in the context of prayer, most often during a block of time I have intentionally set aside to pray. When I am moved to write, it always starts with a word or two that opens the door to a sacred space, and then I pick up my pen and write in my notebook. It is not a process of composing and, as

with the painting, I am frequently surprised by what appears on the page. When I finish, I am often moved to tears; I might even laugh out loud. The best way I can describe the process of this holy writing is that it is like romantic kissing: I lose track of where I stop and where the Other begins. It is an interactive process. It is an act of welcoming and surrendering, giving and receiving.

Great blessings in my life have been Sr. Mary Funge of the Society of Helpers and what she has given me. Mary brought a program called Week of Guided Prayer—A Retreat in Everyday Life to St. Louis in 1995, and in 2005, with her eightieth birthday approaching, she needed someone to take over running it. She asked me to, and I jumped at the opportunity. Since that time, I have led more than thirty of these retreats, serving more than five hundred retreatants. It is a graced ministry. Thank you, God, again. During many of the retreats, I am afforded time to be with God, write down what God offers, and describe what I offer to God. Slowly at first, I began to share with other spiritual directors and retreatants some of these meditations for their own use during prayer times if they wished.

The affirmation and encouragement I received were overwhelming. Many people approached me and expressed how deeply the meditations touched them. They shared the writings with friends and used them when leading groups in prayer. I discovered that these small works were finding their way into Bibles and onto refrigerators for daily reflection and inspiration. I was told time and

again that my writings were different from other spiritual poems and prayers because readers deeply resonated with the words and messages; these reflected what they knew and how they felt but could not express.

The paintings and writings are repeated blessings. The most precious fruits of my conversion, however, are the relationships in my life, all of which have become more loving and authentic: relationships with my wife, children, parents, friends, self, and God. I recall that one day about six months after I started at Aquinas Institute, my son said out of the blue, “You know, Dad, you’re not as crabby as you used to be.” For the past several years, each time my parents and I meet, we hug and say “I love you,” something we did not even know we longed for ten years ago. My relationship with Marilyn has blossomed into a rich, mature romance much more profound than I imagined anyone could experience. She has helped me discover that what love wants most for the other is freedom. Most importantly, now I know in my head and heart that I am loved for who I am, as I am, and this awareness opens me to love everything and everyone more fully, freely, and authentically.

As part of the process of navigating toward publishing this book, a collaborator on this project (thank you, Pat) encouraged me to create an intention board in the form of a collage, and I did. As with painting, I approached this as a form of prayer, and I was very pleased with the result. It was full of joy, abundance, and freedom, and the strongest theme to emerge was connecting. One

part of it says “It’s your gift: connecting new.” And I believe this is true. I have a passion for helping others “connect new”: to bring awareness to what they already understand deep down but have lost or forgotten, and use this awareness to reconnect with each other, with God, and with their authentic selves. The Week and Month of Guided Prayer retreats do exactly this, and to the extent that this book does as well, it is an extension of my living in consonance with my purpose in life.

A Walk Through the Chapters

As a spiritual director, I am likely to ask a retreatant or directee, “How do you experience God?” My question is not “*Do* you experience God” but “*how?*” The fact is that God is with us, even though we may not recognize a particular experience as God or as being of God. The response to this question is often something like “Well, I don’t know if this counts, but I most easily experience God in nature, or when I am holding my grandchild. Actually when I think about it, I experience God more often in everyday life than when I am at church.” I usually say that it is not for me to decide whether such an experience counts, but that I would like to hear more about it. I jump for joy inside myself and hope that I can lead the person deeper into such experiences so they can believe them, claim them, welcome them, and recognize them more easily. Yes, what a privilege it is to be a spiritual director.

This book carries the same hope—that I will help others come to know God more deeply and to claim lives filled with sacredness.

Our first chapter, *Nature*, focuses on experiencing God through this most frequent and profound medium for revelation. Whether it is the beauty of a sunset, the power of a waterfall, the delicacy of a frost flower, or the “silence” of a forest, God not only speaks through nature; we are able to hear.

We then turn our attention to *Home*. A friend once described home as the place where we feel safe. While this is true for many people, a sense of safety at home is but a distant dream for many others. Yet God is there with us, in good times and in bad. Rejoicing, comforting, and suffering with us even when we may not experience God’s presence. Let us grope together to find God with us, and when we long for God’s compassion, let us be compassion for each other (in God).

We move on to *Family*. As human beings, we are created for relationship: with other people, with God, and with ourselves. Our first relationships, and the ones that may have the longest-lasting impact in our lives, are the ones we experience in the context of family. And God is there with us.

As a Christian, I believe that the most perfect, complete revelation of God was Jesus of Nazareth. Fully human and fully divine. A man who was born, lived, suffered, played, loved, died, and rose from the dead. As a Christian, I believe that the flesh is important, that the physical dimension of our existence is important. The flesh

is not something to be overcome or a pit stop on the way to eternal life, but a means of experiencing and expressing God in the world. Yes, we are spiritual beings, but enfleshed spiritual beings. The Word became flesh that we may come to know God more fully. We became flesh for the same reason and so God could be in relationship with us. So often, we dismiss or overlook the humanness, the beautiful humanness of Jesus—the one like us in all things but sin. Yet this excludes the possibility of a relationship with Jesus that can be very powerful, an aspect of Him that can lead to deep love relationship, friendship, and mutuality. Thus, the chapter entitled *Jesus*.

And because the flesh is important, Jesus also offers his flesh to us through the Eucharist, and with our flesh we become united with Christ and with each other in Christ. In the chapter called *Holy Communion*, I invite you to explore how we may experience holy communion both Sacramentally with a capital S and in the context of our families and everyday relationships. Holiness and our encounters with God have no boundaries—if we are open. Our longing for union with each other and, if we are aware, with God, is primordial, from our first moment in the world to our last.

Depending upon your experience with church or “The Church,” you may find the inclusion of the chapter called *Church* quite natural or completely inappropriate. That is precisely my point. Sometimes, some of us do encounter the Divine in the context of church, and is it not right to honor that as well? Sometimes, for some of us, our interaction with church informs the rest of our

lives, and our lives inform our participation in church. However, for many of us, church is a place of disappointment, disaffectedness, and even injury. So I invite you to consider these questions: “What is church?” and “What do *you* wish for from church, if anything?” Perhaps even if you do not attend a church in the conventional sense, you are a member of a sacred community, and you may wish to consider this chapter in that context.

Our last chapter, *Living in the Present Moment*, hopes for a sense of integration and immediacy. The Hebrew Scriptures use I AM to describe God. God does not exist in the past or the future. If we wish to encounter God, we must be attentive to now.

Yes, the Sacred is all around us. I invite you to notice it and celebrate it with me.

Nature

“And when all memory of me has passed away,
still I will know,
still I will know,
that I always was,
and I always will be,
a part of God.”

Heaven

I woke up in heaven today ...
I could hear the angels singing praises to God
through the voices of the birds.
I could see the majesty of life energy
manifested through budding flowers and leaves—
white, green, yellow, blue, mauve.
I could witness freedom as birds soared and swooped,
as butterflies fluttered along,
and through my choice whether to be attentive.
I was blinded by the beatific vision of the sun,
and the sky,
and a young child's smile.
I woke up in heaven today,
and wondered, "What do people do in heaven?"
and I suppose the answer may be
enjoy life,
share love,
participate in beauty,
and praise God in the process.

I Accept

I can't create a tree,
make cells out of nothing,
or make them grow and multiply and blossom.
I can't imagine an insect I've never seen,
or a sound I've never heard,
or what it might be like beyond the limitlessness of space.
But I can help someone feel loved,
and that is all God has called me to do.
Yes, I accept that I am not God,
that I cannot do the things only God can do,
but I also accept that I am of God and in God
and that, in communion with God,
I am invited to love the world around me.
In deep gratitude, I accept.

Earth Tones

Always green trees welcome
gentle white snowflakes.
Yellowed grass hibernates.
Fertile earth brown waits.
How can anyone say
we are not already in heaven?

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