The Circle
Dance of Time

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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Reasons of the Heart

We all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence.

—Dag Hammarskjöld

When it comes to faith, “The heart has its reasons that reason does not know,” Pascal says. Those reasons, though, can become known to the mind, I believe, and insight or understanding is what happens when reasons of the heart do become known to the mind. “Faith seeking understanding,” a phrase of Saint Anselm going back to Saint Augustine, is a seeking to know the reasons of the heart for believing in God and in Christ and in eternal life. Faith seeking understanding, Karl Barth says, is the method of theology.

Years ago when I was studying theology in Rome, I thought of going to Basel to study with Karl Barth, but when I learned that would not be possible, I thought instead of staying in Rome and studying with Bernard Lonergan. From him I learned the idea of understanding as insight into image. Thus faith seeking understanding became for me faith seeking insight into the great images of
faith, especially life and light and love, the three great metaphors of the Gospel of John. Later I came to my own notion of insight as what happens when the reasons of the heart become known to the mind. It became essential for me then to explore the realm of the heart and to understand the human heart and the heart’s desire.

“For if there is anything that stands out more clearly than all else in the vital choices of this book,” Helen Luke says of Tolkien’s trilogy, “it is that the right choice always springs from the heart—the word being used here to mean, not the seat of emotions, but the place where cold intellect and the hot desires meet, are honored, and then unite in true objective feeling.” What then is the heart, if not the seat of emotions? It is the central place where thought and feeling meet, where both are respected, and where they unite with one another. What is that central place? I think of the opening sentence of Dag Hammarskjöld’s brochure for the Meditation Room at the UN, “We all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence.” That center of stillness I take to be the heart in such phrases as “the heart’s desire” and “the reasons of the heart,” and the surrounding silence I take to be the surrounding presence of God.

It is true, Pascal’s own understanding of the reasons of the heart is, as he says, “Heart, instinct, principles” (Coeur, instinct, principes). If I take the heart to be our “center of stillness surrounded by silence,” though, I can say that when we are in our center of stillness we see things as they truly are, but when we are off center, caught up in anger or anxiety or depression, our vision is distorted. So what Pascal had in mind does come true for us in our center of stillness, and what he goes on to say about faith as “God sensible to the heart” (Dieu sensible au coeur) coincides with our taking the surrounding silence to be the surrounding presence of God.
Heart as Center of Stillness

“How do you find that center of stillness?” students of mine asked me, visiting me in California where I was on sabbatical leave. “Let’s go to the Muir Woods,” I replied, “for the giant redwoods will take you right into your center of stillness.” And so they did, and so do other situations where you encounter nature, sitting by a lake or by the seashore or looking at the mountains or looking up into the night sky. Once you have found your center of stillness, you can find it again more easily, and when you have found it again and again, you can begin to live in it. Then a further question begins to arise, how to live in your center of stillness. All our troubles, Pascal says, stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room. Sitting quietly in a room, nevertheless, can mean dwelling in our center of stillness.

Our inability to sit quietly in a room is our inability to stay in our center of stillness, our inability to sustain that stillness and its surrounding silence. “At first the practice of inward prayer is a process of alternation between outer things and the Inner Light,” Thomas Kelly says in A Testament of Devotion, “Yet what is sought is not alternation, but simultaneity.” Those Quaker terms, inner light and alternation and simultaneity, are very helpful here. When I am in my center of stillness, I see things as they truly are, I see them in the “inner light,” but I am not always there, I am sometimes off center, caught up in my hopes and fears, thus “alternation” between being in and being out, and yet I seek to live there in my center of stillness surrounded by the silence of the divine presence and thus in “simultaneity” between my outer life and my inner life. I see then my own task at this point in my life, to learn to dwell in my center of stillness surrounded by the silent presence of God.
We are travelers rather than dwellers, Bruce Chatwin argues against Pascal in *The Songlines*; the human being is a “wanderer in the scorching and barren wilderness of this world.” Thus the Songlines are tracks across aboriginal Australia, each with its own guiding song. We are both dwellers and travelers, I want to say instead, and our center of stillness surrounded by silence is the quiet eye of a moving storm, the quiet eye of a hurricane. So we dwell in our center of stillness, and yet we travel in space and in time. The reasons of the heart, therefore, are the reasons of dwelling and also the reasons of traveling. There is a unity nonetheless that I call “the heart’s desire.” Thus there is the plurality of the reasons of the heart, and yet there is the unity of the heart’s desire.

What is the heart’s desire? For the traveler it is adventure, for the dweller, serenity, but if we consider the transcendence of longing, how our heart is never satisfied with any finite object, how “our heart is restless until it rests in you,” going for adventure and for serenity leads to living in the eye of the hurricane, living in the quiet eye of the moving storm, living in our moving center of stillness surrounded by silence. There we find “the inner light,” but we do not see the light itself. Instead we see things in the light. Do we long to see the light itself?

If we do long to see the light itself, then our heart’s desire is well expressed in Newman’s lines “Lead, Kindly Light,”

Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom
   Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home—
   Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene—one step enough for me.”

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It is true, the inner light can lead us while we see things in the light and do not see the light itself. The experience is that of “catching the light” as Arthur Zajonc says—just as physical light is unseen as it passes through the darkness of outer space, unseen except where it strikes an object, so the inner light too is seen only when it shows us the way or the next step on the way. All the same, our consciousness of the inner light illuminating our way, that it is a “kindly light,” can lead to a desire to see the light itself, and dwelling in our center of stillness surrounded by the silence of the divine presence is a repose in light. “Wisdom is repose in light,” Joseph Joubert says. The inner light leads us in our restless traveling in space and time, and wisdom is our rest, our dwelling in it, reposing in light.

What is “repose in light”? Maurice Blanchot commenting on Joubert’s words says “repose in light can be—tends to be—peace through light, light that appeases and that gives peace.” On the other hand, he adds “but repose in light is also repose—deprivation of all external help and impetus—so that nothing comes to disturb, or to pacify, the pure movement of light.” The two meanings are like heaven and hell. I met a man on a plane once who said the German word Hell means “light” (I looked up the word afterwards and found the adjective hell means “bright, shining, clear, distinct, light, fair, pale as in pale ale”), and he said that is what hell is to him, counsel without comfort, without consolation.

“I imagine the dead waking, dazed, into a shadowless light in which they know themselves altogether for the first time,” Wendell Berry says. “It is a light that is merciless until they can accept its mercy; by it they are at once condemned and redeemed. It is Hell until it is Heaven.” The dead pass like Dante, according to this, from hell to
heaven. I suppose the living too, again like Dante, who was living when he made his journey, may pass from hell to heaven in this same way. If hell, as my friend on the plane said, is light, counsel without comfort, without consolation, then heaven too is light, but counsel with comfort, with consolation. The Greek word *parakleitos*, describing the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, is translated *Counselor* in the Revised Standard Version, but *Comforter* in the King James Version. We go from counsel to comfort, and the light becomes the “kindly light.”

“Wisdom is repose in light,” Joubert’s saying, comes true especially when other lights in life go out. It is like the light given to Frodo in Tolkien’s trilogy, “May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.”

Suppose death is imminent. That is indeed a time “when all other lights go out.” Or suppose you are aging and ways once open to you are closed. Then indeed the inner light is “a light to you in dark places,” for as the “kindly light” it is able to lead you one step at a time on an adventure with God in time. As Newman concludes,

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on,
O’er moor and fen, o’er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone.

If repose in light is wisdom, is it what Vico calls “poetic wisdom”? Certainly I find it in poetry, in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Light is one of the three great metaphors in the Gospel of John, life and light and love, and so we could assume repose in light is also a metaphor and thus belongs to poetic wisdom. I wonder too if repose in light is as near as we can come in this life to the blessedness of “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

What does
it mean to be pure in heart? “Purity of heart is to will one thing,” Kierkegaard says.18 Is willing one thing the same as seeing God? Not unless the one thing is the will of God. “His will is our peace” (la sua volontate e nostra pace), Dante says,19 and that is how we can tell what the will of God is at every crossroad—it is the way of peace. When I live in the peace of God’s will, I am able to see with the heart, and “it is only with the heart that one can see rightly,” as Antoine de Saint Exupéry says; “what is essential is invisible to the eye.”20

If “purity of heart is to will one thing,” does that mean the heart is the same as the will? No, I would say, it is our center of stillness surrounded by silence. Our will emerges through the exercise of choice, but there comes a moment when we pass from will to willingness, as when Dag Hammarskjöld writes in his journal, “For all that has been—Thanks! To all that shall be—Yes!”21 At that moment our will becomes conformable to our center of stillness, and it is then that we come to the purity of willing one thing. The self as will becomes one with the deep self of our center of stillness. It is, as Gabriel Marcel says, “the subordination of self to a superior reality, a reality at my deepest level, more truly me than I am myself.”22 Actually Marcel here is defining love, where will yields to something other than will, and thus to see with the heart is to see with the eyes of love.

There is a fine rabbinic story about seeing God. “In the olden days there were men who saw the face of God. Why don’t they any more?” a student asked a rabbi. “Because nowadays no one can stoop so low,” the rabbi replied.23 Indeed “the subordination of self to a superior reality” means stooping low, and with our ideal of autonomy “nowadays no one can stoop so low” unless we renounce our autonomy, unless I recognize “a reality at my deepest level, more truly me than I am myself.”
autonomy makes us incapable of seeing God, and if Marcel’s definition of love is right, our autonomy makes us incapable as well of love.

It is true, even if I do stoop so low, renouncing autonomy, subordinating myself to a superior reality, “a reality at my deepest level, more truly me than I am myself,” my seeing is only “catching the light,” seeing things in the light and not yet seeing the light itself. All the same, my finding in love “a reality at my deepest level, more truly me than I am myself” is an answer to Saint Augustine’s prayer in his Soliloquies, “May I know me! May I know thee!” (noverim me! noverim te!) Learning to love is learning to find that reality, learning to find my center of stillness, to find the surrounding silence, learning to dwell in my center of stillness, learning to move with it as the quiet eye of a moving storm. In the language of the Upanishads this would be learning to find God in the heart (Atman) who is the same as God in the universe (Brahman).

“If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential,” Kierkegaard says; “if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?” But there is an eternal consciousness in us, Kierkegaard wants to say and I want to say, eternal in the sense of timeless. To say there is sounds like the Atman of the Upanishads, God in the heart, but Kierkegaard is thinking rather of an I and thou with God, the I and thou of prayer. The I there is indeed “a reality at my deepest level more truly me than I am myself.” It is “a center of stillness surrounded by silence,” but God is the thou of prayer and the presence of God is the surrounding silence.
“If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim,” Kierkegaard goes on, “if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches—how empty and devoid of comfort would life be!” To be sure, Kierkegaard here is talking about rescuing someone from oblivion by remembering as the poet remembers the hero, and Kierkegaard here is the poet and Abraham the hero. Goethe rescues himself from oblivion by turning the truth of his own life into poetry. Saint Augustine does so by turning the truth of his life into prayer, and that leads into a more profound sense of rescue, like that of Enoch in Genesis, “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.”

There is a further step then, from prayer to indwelling, from the I and thou of prayer to the I in them and thou in me of indwelling. “We can know more than we can tell,” Michael Polanyi says, and we do so by indwelling. That formula, “I in them and thou in me,” is from the Gospel of John, and it seems to combine the I and thou of prayer with the in them and in me of indwelling. The I and thou of prayer is a relationship with the eternal, but the in them and in me of indwelling is the eternal in us, and so it becomes for us the basis of eternal life, and the words describing it are “words of eternal life.”

Indwelling brings us back to the heart as “a center of stillness surrounded by silence.” Dag Hammarskjöld ends his brochure on the Meditation Room at the UN by saying “It is for those who come here to fill the void with what
they find in their center of stillness,” for the Meditation Room with its bare rock of iron ore and the beam of light falling upon it is like an emptiness waiting to be filled. I take it that Buddhists will let the emptiness be empty, Jews and Muslims will fill it with an I and thou relation with God, Hindus and Christians will fill it with indwelling—Hindus with “God dwells in you as you,” Christians with “Christ dwells in you as you.” Following Christ, I believe, is making his God my God, as he says to Mary Magdalene, “my Father and your Father, my God and your God,” and entering thus into his relation with God means his dwelling in us and God dwelling in him, I in them and thou in me.

What then are the reasons of the heart? And what is the heart’s desire? In its primordial form the heart’s desire is for eternal life—that is the theme of the ancient epic of Gilgamesh. This may be the reason for the transcendence of longing, that our heart is never satisfied with anything finite, that as Saint Augustine says in prayer “our heart is restless until it rests in you.” At the same time “our heart is restless” may be the first and fundamental reason of the heart, and “until it rests in you” may be the second and the fulfillment of the heart’s desire. The two can be separated, as when Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit speak of “the restlessness of desire” without any thought of “until it rests in you,” and on the other hand Joseph Joubert speaks of “repose in light” without mention of the restlessness of the heart or thought of repose in light as repose in God. Again, “it is for those who come here to fill the void with what they find in their center of stillness,” to fill it with “the restlessness of desire,” to fill it with “repose in light.”

There is a unity, nevertheless, in this variety of experience, a possible unity. I call it rest in restlessness. It is the poise of a whirling gyroscope, the quiet eye of a moving
storm, the still point of a turning world. It is the center of stillness we all have within us surrounded by silence, understood as a moving center, leading us on a journey with God in time. So there is repose and yet restless movement, repose in light and yet the restlessness of desire. Wisdom then is this repose in restless movement. By accepting my own restlessness I come to rest in it.

Wisdom, though, is in dwelling in our center of stillness, dwelling in it and moving with it. That is how it is rest in restlessness. It is the wisdom thus of dwelling and of traveling. Buddhist wisdom is in letting the emptiness of the empty center be empty. Jewish and Islamic wisdom is in filling it with an I and thou relation with God. Hindu and Christian wisdom is in filling it with the divine indwelling. Here again we come upon “the variety of religious experience” as William James calls it. “There is an ancient saying that the sense of a vessel is not in its shell but in the void,” Hammarskjöld says. “So it is with this room,” and then he goes on to draw the conclusion we have been considering, “It is for those who come here to fill the void with what they find in their center of stillness.” I take it then that there is a common experience here, that of our center of stillness surrounded by silence. It is an insight into the experience proper to each of the religions.

Passing over to the religions therefore is possible in virtue of this common experience of a center of stillness surrounded by silence, but passing over means entering into the insight proper to each religion. There is a unity of religious experience, therefore, as well as “the varieties of religious experience,” and the unity is that of the heart as our center of stillness surrounded by silence, while the varieties are those of the reasons of the heart known in the various religions. There is a coming back, moreover, from these reasons to those of one’s own religion after passing...
over to the others, a coming back enriched with new understanding. For all our understanding, though, there is still the unknown. “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me,”

Pascal says.

**Heart Surrounded by Silence**

If “we all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence,” I take it that the surrounding silence is the presence of God. In Buddhism, to be sure, the surrounding silence is simply silence. If I take the silence to be the presence of God, however, I am surrounded by the presence, and the practice of this awareness is what is called “the practice of the presence of God.” It means I am walking with God and God is walking with me. It is true, taking the surrounding silence as the presence of God is an interpretation, and yet living out that interpretation is a real experience. It is an experience of the name “Emmanuel (which means, God with us),”

according to the Gospel of Matthew. “Where the storyteller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak,” Isak Dinesen says. “Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness.”

Here the story is that of “God with us.” I think of the film *King of Hearts* set in a French village during the First World War.

A Scottish soldier takes refuge in the local insane asylum when German soldiers come into the village. A German officer comes and asks the inmates each who they are, looking for enemy soldiers who might be hiding among them. One says “I am the Duke of Clubs” (Le Duc de Trefle) and the others name themselves for other playing cards. When he comes to the Scottish soldier (played by Alan Bates) he says “I am the King of Hearts.” The other inmates exclaim “The King of Hearts!