

Inchoate Desire



Sometimes while praying the Psalms, I'm caught looking quite uncomfortably into a mirror reflecting back to me my own seeming dishonesty. For example, we pray these words in the Psalms: My soul longs for you in the night. ... Like a deer that yearns for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you my God. ... For you alone do I long! For you alone do I thirst!

If I'm honest, I have to admit that a lot of times, perhaps most times, my soul longs for a lot of things that do not seem of God. How often can I honestly pray: For you, God, alone do I long. For you alone do I thirst! In my restlessness, my earthy desires, and natural instincts, I long for many things that don't appear very God-focused or heavenly at all. I suspect that's true for most of us for good parts of our lives. Rare is the mystic who can say those prayers and mean them with her full heart on any given day.

But human desire is a complex thing. There's a surface and there's a depth, and in every one of our longings and motivations we can ask ourselves this: What am I really looking for here? I know what I want on the surface, here and now, but what am I ultimately longing for in this?

This discrepancy, between what we're aware of on the surface and what's sensed only in some dark, inchoate way at a deeper level, is what's captured in a distinction philosophers make between what's explicit in our awareness and what's implicit within it. The explicit refers to what we are aware of consciously ("I want this particular thing!"); whereas the implicit refers to the unconscious factors that are also in play but of which we are unaware. These we only sense, vaguely, in some unconscious part of our soul.

For instance, Karl Rahner, who was fond of this distinction and who puts it to good use in his spirituality, offers us this (crass though clear) example of the distinction between the explicit and the

implicit within our motivation and desires. Imagine this, he says: A man, lonely and restless and depressed on a Saturday night, goes to a singles' bar, picks up a prostitute and goes to bed with her. On the surface his motivation and desire are as undisguised as they are crass. He's not longing for God in his bed on this particular night. Or is he?

On the surface, of course he's not, his desire seems purely self-centered and the antithesis of holy longing. But, parsed out to its deepest root, his desire is ultimately a longing for divine intimacy, for the bread of life, for heaven. He's longing for God at the very depth of his soul and at the very depth of his motivation, except he isn't aware of this. Raw desire for immediate gratification is all that he's consciously aware of at this time, but this doesn't change his ultimate motivation, of which this is a symptom. At a deeper level, of which he is not consciously aware, he's still longing for the bread of life, for God alone. His soul is still that of a deer, longing for clear flowing streams, except that on this given night another stream is promising him a more immediate tonic that he can have right now.

Recently I taught a course on the spirituality of aging and dying. Stealing a line from Goethe's poem, *Holy Longing*, I entitled the course poetically: *Insane for the Light*. In a term paper, one of the students, a woman, reflecting on her own journey towards aging and dying, wrote these words:

“And then last night I began to think that dying is making love with God, the consummation after a lifetime of flirtations, encounters, meetings in the dark, and constant yearning, longing, and sense of loneliness that does make one insane for the light. I reflected on the *Song of Songs* and thought that it could be an analogy of how I see dying, not necessarily as the body's disintegration and demise, but rather as the entire transition that I was born destined to make. I think of my life as a love story with its ups and downs like any love story, but always going in the direction of God with the finality of death being the wedding of the love between God and myself after a lifetime betrothal.”

She puts it as well as Rahner and the philosophers, though her words are more direct. She too, in analyzing her desire, points out there are levels, explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious.

Yes, our lives, with all their tensions, restlessness, youthful immaturities, adult depressions, cold lonely seasons, times of doubt, times of desperation, breakdowns, and occasional irresponsible exuberance will surely be marked by flirtations and encounters that seem to exhibit desires that are not for the bread of life. But, they are, ultimately, and one day they will find and know their full consummation.

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