

# TEENAGE SPIRITUALITY – AN OXYMORON?

By WILLIAM J. O'MALLEY

**O**CCASIONALLY, PEOPLE ASK ME QUESTIONS as if I had suddenly become the Carl Sagan of the adolescent universe. I grant that thirty years of reading eighty reflection papers each, from what now amounts to over 4,000 high school and college students, has given me perhaps a better insight into what teenagers think than, say, a first-time parent – and surely better than the teenager. But I still have more than a few reminders of my finitude and fallibility. One of them arrived in the mail one Friday, from a group of high school principals, asking me to give a workshop on 'Teenage spirituality' next winter in Tucson.

My first reaction was, of course, selfish: who wouldn't trade slush for sunshine in March? My second reaction was cynical, the result of trying to teach distributive justice for so long to kids whose orthodontia payments alone would gobble up a year of another family's welfare cheques. That voice from the unredeemed part of me snorted, ' "Teenage spirituality"? An oxymoron, like "athletic scholarship" or "our school community" or "dehydrated water".'

Consider an old ape in a zoo, reputedly our distant cousin. If he is unbothered by anything outside his smallish brain – flies, the gurgles in his belly, the pheromones wafting from the female ape quartered next door – what does he do? He sits, staring vacantly at nothing. Now visit a required study hall for students with academic deficiencies at even a very good school. The family resemblance is staggering. Teenage spirituality? Would any sane person challenge either cousin with *Hamlet*? Much less Teresa of Avila? Even M. Scott Peck? There is, of course, a difference: the ape would be befuddled by *Playboy*.

By far the majority of the young people I have taught and teach – judging by their responses to those 350,000 reflection pages – appear to have little genuine spirituality. For them, the content of the word 'spirit' is the same as in 'a spirited pony' or 'school spirit' (and even that, in late years, has become rather 'uncool'); adolescents in the electronic age are far more concerned with surface 'personality' than depth of 'character'. Where character is irrelevant, spirituality is incomprehensible.

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But then the wee voice of the redeemed part of me whispered, ‘Pst! You don’t know what the hell “spirituality” even means, do you?’ As usual, that voice was spot on. I had heard the word all my life, though – oddly – I rarely found myself using it. I had written four books about praying. But I did not, honestly, know what ‘spirituality’ meant. I wonder if many people who use it often really do. So I figured: better sit down and teach myself a lesson, to lessen my ignorance and perhaps help someone else.

### *Spirituality*

Spirituality is my spirit-life, and my spirit is my soul – my self, my character, my who-I-am – fully *alive*. Soul is to spirit what the candle is to its flame. My intellect is intrigued, but my soul is stirred. It is that potential within me which responds to the numinous and the sacred in nature, in art, in people, in God, which is humbled when it senses how the world is charged with God’s grandeur. It is where all the nebulous, unquantifiable aspects of my self reside: honour, awe, genuine sentiment, loyalty, remorse, patriotism, faith, hope, love (when it is purged of self). Just as my hunger for food is in my belly, and my hunger for reasons is in my brain, my hunger to survive death lives in my soul. But the state of my soul-aliveness – my spirituality – is something I can comprehend only vaguely, in a glass darkly, as elusive as the moments which quicken it.

Most importantly, my soul – all in me that separates me from the old ape – *is* only a potential. It need not be ignited. Or even acknowledged. Even by the teachers who claim to be training me in ‘the humanities’. Even by those who conduct liturgies.

All the scholastic philosophers to the contrary notwithstanding, human beings are definitely not just ‘rational animals’. If that were the limit of our being, we would be merely apes with computers implanted – which is merely a variant of scientism. It is precisely that simplism C. S. Lewis lambastes in his masterful *The abolition of man*: that unquestioned rationalist-materialist supposition which underlies most of our educational decisions (even in Christian schools), no matter what our brochures claim. *Mens sana in corpore sano?* (A healthy mind in a healthy body?) No. If that is all we train, we will get what Lewis calls ‘men without chests’: alternately cerebral and visceral, but not human – because we have left out what makes us human: not the visceral, surely, nor even the cerebral, but the spiritual. The heart, not the brain, makes us human – and not ‘heart’ in the sense of the sentimentalist, but in the sense Hopkins used for Margaret’s sudden understanding of death:

Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
 What heart heard of, ghost guessed.

Neither belly nor brain can account for unselfish love, awe, honour, the hope to survive death. Only an enlivened soul.

Lewis's contemporary, Dorothy Sayers, explains the human soul as well as anyone I have read. In *The mind of the Maker*, she says that in the triadic union of the Godhead, the Father expresses himself – his Word – and, in that very self-expression, a power of loving is generated, who is their Spirit. That union is like joining the opposite poles of a magnet, from which a totally new power emerges. Just so, in the fusion of mind and body, a third power is – or can be – generated: the human spirit. But most of us do not want or are unable to express – or even apprehend – our self. And therefore there is no self; no character, just a 'personality', not a human but merely an ape's cousin with a tragically undeveloped human potential.

Most of the students I now teach are reductionists. They are irritated by complexity; uncomfortable with subtlety or ambiguity. Qualifiers simply disappear. One time I said in class, 'I find it difficult to understand how many people, frequently in their lives, could perfectly fulfil the requirements for mortal sin. Serious matter is all around, but "sufficient reflection" and "full" consent of the will?' That afternoon, the school's president called me in to tell me two parents had phoned and said their sons had reported I had said in class there is no such thing as mortal sin.

These reductionist minds hear their biology teachers more acutely and definitively than their religion teachers. Thus they constantly assert humans are no more than higher-level animals. (Proctoring study halls tempts me to the same over-hasty conclusion.) To be sure, beasts sense dangers even humans cannot; dolphins and whales communicate at enormous distances; animal mothers show great 'love' for their young, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

But students fail to account for the difference between knowledge and understanding, and between affection and genuine love, which is not a mere feeling but an act of will which takes over when the feelings fail, when the beloved is no longer even likeable. Perhaps the reason is they have been educated only to know and not to understand, and they have felt only loyalty and affection but never genuine, self-sacrificial love. An animal may sacrifice for her own, but we can sacrifice even for our enemies. The reductionists fail to realize that no sow, snoozing in maternal bliss in a ringlet of piglets, has her dreams disturbed by the certainty they will all one day die.

The human spirit is distanced from the animal, not by a smeary, gradual change but by a stunning quantum leap, by the fact that animal nature is a command, but human nature is an invitation. No lion refuses to act leonine, but the daily papers are glutted with evidence human beings refuse to act humanly. We are free to act precisely like higher-level animals – only with the added advantage of the human brain, which raises animal shrewdness and savagery to a capacity for saturation bombings and extermination camps. What allows us to call such wretches ‘inhuman’ is not their lack of a body, nor their lack of a mind, but their lack of an enlivened soul: the human spirit.

The genetic instructions in the human body are what Albert Rosenfeld calls ‘a framework of opportunities’. The lion follows its inner programming automatically, but the human male with big shoulders and strong legs is free to work on them to become a Big Ten fullback – or to take up the violin. Just so with the human spirit. A ghetto youngster can turn his squalor into a ‘Rocky’ story, and an advantaged youngster can turn his opportunity into ‘The picture of Dorian Grey’. We are free, and freedom resides in the soul. And we are free to actualize our human potential. Or not.

Just as the hungers of the human belly can be palliated with junk food and the hungers of the human mind sated by *The Star* and *Sporting News*, the hunger of the human spirit can get an ersatz jag from pep rallies and Boy Scout oaths and pop music. Most students I teach quote U-2 and Springsteen as if they were T. S. Eliot and Holy Writ. But the result is the same with the soul as with the belly and brain: flab. It is why so many of our young – and not-so-young – seem dis-spirited.

And why not? Their education comes from the school of Thomas Gradgrind. Their aspirations are formed by materialist media who teach them to be good little competitors and consumers. Their conversations could be transpiring between characters in a Beckett play. Their concerts are liturgies in praise of Baal.

The spirit which is the result of conscious marriage of cerebral and visceral is an enlivened soul, for which the Latin is *anima*, as in ‘animated’. The word is not masculine – like the education which urges us to ‘master’ the data, like the admonition of parents and coaches to ‘dominate’ the opposition. It is feminine. That view fits the metaphors of the soul and Church as the Bride of Christ. Lewis believes, then, the proper posture of any soul before God – whether in a male or female – is ‘feminine’: not in any way passive, but receptive, fertile, vulnerable, creative. In that sense, God comes to each of our souls, in a daily

Annunciation, and asks, ‘Conceive my Son in you today’. But most of us are too busy or ‘not at home’ when God knocks.

In that sense, then, the process of civilization – of humanization – has been a process of feminizing the macho-savage side of what are only potential human beings. The Viking or knight is merely an Olympic-class butcher without the minstrel and his (feminine) harp to give his slaughter a meaning, a context, to make his story not merely titillate the mind but stir the soul. And Christianity took one quantum leap further: its hero not only eschewed battle, but conquered by his sheer impotence.

As I struggled this far, the unredeemed voice became positively smug: ‘See?’ The possibility of accessing the teenage soul seemed a task to daunt Hercules. ‘Teenage spirituality? In the nineties? Flat-out contradiction.’

Yet I sense a soul-life in our young, like the yearning for freedom in the fifth-generation slave. It is in the grain. Except perhaps for the autistic and sociopath, it cannot be excised from any human being. It is born in us: the itch for Eden.

#### *The obstacles in the audience*

The sea-change in the ethos of western societies since the 1950s was so gradual most of us hardly took note of it. But imagine a teenager of that time, Alfie, say, or Georgy Girl, transported by a time machine into the latter years of this millennium. Aside from the fact most of the materials in our homes and offices had not been invented then, our mores would leave them flabbergasted. Today we turn the pages of our newspapers with no shock at battered babies, drive-by shootings, strung-out athletes and film stars, partial-birth abortions, corrupt politicians. We hardly advert to trash-filled streets coated with graffiti unless it is particularly blatant. It is not just the young who have teflon-coated souls.

The new age began, I think, at least in America, with the assassination of President John Kennedy, who epitomized the golden post-war years and their prosperity and hope, yet he was shattered by a pasty-faced nobody. After that, disillusionments came in battalions – Vietnam, Watergate, tax scandals, government fraud; even the FBI! None of us will be caught again with our hearts on our sleeves. In a class of thirty, only one or two will admit having been moved to tears by a film. Patriotism shrivelled to paying taxes and perhaps voting. What leaves the young open-mouthed today? A beautiful body, a spectacular goal, an explosive rock concert. All external, all soul-substitutes.

In order to feel awe, one has – by definition – to feel small in contrast to the stimulus: a mountain at dawn, a star-strewn sky, the beloved,

God. But the permanent posture of most youngsters now is not vulnerability but constant defensiveness; not on their knees but with their dukes up.

One reflection paper asks the student for his or her heroes; more and more in recent years, half the students answer, 'I don't think I have heroes'. It makes sense. A pervasive scepticism began to infect the American spirit after the downfall of the Camelot-Flower Child crusade. No hero or heroine can last long with an army of investigative reporters dogging their Achilles' heels. The media smother us with emotional programming we all know is phoney but nonetheless fall for. 'Value' is strictly a left-brain commodity, a solid return for your investment.

Another class, about values, pictures a little girl with a \$50 bill in one hand and a stuffed rabbit in the other: 'If, by some impossible turn of events, you were forced to throw one of those three into a furnace, which would you throw?' In the 150 or so times I have done it, some wag inevitably says the little girl. Once that is behind us, the majority say the rabbit. Why? You take the 50 bucks and buy another – ignoring, of course, that the money is the girl's. Then, gradually, it begins to dawn on some that the child has very little sense of the value of money, but that the worn-out rabbit is her most precious possession. There are two kinds of value, one easily quantifiable by the left brain, the other not so easily boxed in but resonating in the sensitized soul. Nor is the exercise based on 'some impossible turn of events'. Fifty years ago, people faced just that choice: to process millions of little girls in gas ovens, like garbage. Those who agreed still had human minds and human bodies, but they had lost hold of their human souls. Youngsters *begin* to see that.

Another reflection is also enlightening: 'Given a choice between a job you detested which paid an obscenely high salary, or a job you truly loved but made you, your spouse, and family really have to struggle to make ends meet, which would you take?' I have kept a running log, and 85 per cent would choose to be miserable with the high salary. Their reasons sound noble: they would rather be unhappy if it gave their families 'a good life'. Rarely do they consider that their family's happiness might be affected by their own week-long misery, or that their children would gain something important by facing the challenge of doing with less, and even by getting a job that might make them grow up.

Each year we go through psychiatrist Erik Erikson's stages of disequilibrium, natural crises arising in the course of our lives which

invite us to more profound, broader-based lives than we had been contented with before. Birth is an unnerving crisis in which we are rejected from the paradise of the womb, out into the cold and noise, and our first birthday gift is a slap to make us cry. But without it, we would die. After a year or two in which our every whim and need was our parents' command, development of our muscle control allows them to force us to greater independence of them in weaning and potty training. Then parents boot us out to play with other children, in the cold! But without it, we would never learn to solve problems without an adult to arbitrate. Then they strand us in kindergarten with all those strangers! Without it, though, we would never learn the skills to survive on our own. Then comes adolescence, atomic disequilibrium! But all its physical, psychological, social confusions have a purpose: to invite us to evolve a personally validated self.

Despite the fact we have previously gone through Erikson's stages of disequilibrium, no student ever wrote that he or she would be willing to let the children struggle in order to develop spine; they would rather give their children comfort than character. No student ever wrote he or she would choose a spouse who would rather have *them*, fulfilled, than a pool in the backyard. There is only one meaning to 'the good life', and it has nothing whatever to do with Plato and Aristotle, much less Jesus Christ.

Many adults fail to realize how much 'image' dominates the lives of the young. Since the caves, youngsters at puberty have suddenly awakened to an awareness of their faces and physiques: 'Mom, am I pretty?' 'Is my body wimpy?' But today exploiting that concern is a multi-billion-dollar industry. The self-doubtful voices within the child are now amplified and multiplied until their lives are totally surrounded by judgemental mirrors. There are a variety of responses to that pervasive incitement to self-doubt: 'cool', conformity, projection, alienation, one-upmanship – among many others. But all of them are reactions based on a judgement about surfaces, about personality rather than character. What you seem to be is far more important than who you are; nothing succeeds like the appearance of success.

The qualities that differentiate our species from the old ape are that we can understand (as opposed to merely knowing), that we can love (as opposed to merely feeling affection), and that we can continue to grow *as* human. But each of those potentials requires vulnerability. To understand more fully, we have to be humble before the evidence, into whatever unnerving paths it leads. To love more deeply and widely, we have to be susceptible to the needs and problems and unpredictability

of those around us, no matter how inconvenient. To grow more human we have to suffer, giving up a self we had become comfortable with in order to evolve an even better self, often at great cost.

But if the discovery of one's soul depends on vulnerability, how can we convince youngsters of the crucial importance of laying hold of a self – much less the painful effort of going in quest of it, when they spend most of their time on the defensive?

Not only do the ads and media subvert the search for the soul, but our children's education – both in school and at home – is almost exclusively surface and pragmatic. Teachers and parents fall back on the only motivation for learning they can think of: not to discover a self, a character, a philosophy of life, but to get a good job. Since Sputnik, 'everybody knows' maths and science are the important subjects, even for an aspiring lawyer or artist. Even the so-called 'soft' disciplines like English and history are primarily analytical, left-brain. The object of education is to 'master' the data, not to be vulnerable to it and follow wherever the subject chooses to lead. When parents ask, 'How are you doing in school?' they do not often mean, 'Is it exciting?' but 'How are your grades?'

The possibility of 'teenage spirituality' is looking less and less likely. And yet, like any missionary, one becomes hypersensitive to any flicker of interest, any hint there might be hope. The Iroquois let me tag along on their treks; the Mandarins cock a reluctantly quizzical eye at my sextant and my clocks. If parents and teachers can establish credibility with this sceptical audience in *non*-religious spiritual areas, there is a chance we might see that squinted face that is saying, 'Hey, wait a minute. I may be missing something. You listen to . . . God?'

### *Sensitizing the soul*

The first step is to acknowledge that our primary obligation as Christian parents and educators is *not* the public exams. One would be an idealistic fool to ignore them, but they are not the reason we charge tuition and hang crucifixes in our classrooms. We have a duty to our students' minds, but we have a more profound duty to their souls, to sensitize them, feminize them so that no youngster – especially no boy – needs apologize for having one. Our task as apostles to the young is to lead them, like our Father, to understand and express the self – not merely the 'sometime spirit' that emerges by chance during a dutiful mass or during one of the astonishing, numinous, Oh-my-God! moments, but the spirit which *is* the child's true self. But that will require a major conversion, in teachers and administrators, from our pervasively pragmatic and efficient mindset.

There is a natural potential in every human person, even non-religious persons, which responds to the numinous and sacred in nature and art, and, if grace builds on nature, we can begin our movement toward the spirituality which deals with God by sensitizing children early to that more accessible and less intimidating union with the powerful and invisible forces all around them (which are, in fact, the aliveness of God).

With younger children, rather than instruct them about sin (of which they are not yet capable) or about the Virgin Birth and Trinity (which baffled even Aquinas), let us teach them, once a week at least, ways of relaxing and centring themselves, opening themselves to God. Very young children are far better candidates for meditative, receptive, 'feminine' prayer than adults. They are less uptight, less defensive, more imaginative. According to Jesus, they are already in the kingdom. Teach them to feel it, enjoy it, revel in it, perhaps even remain in it.

Sometime after the first year, learning gradually ceases being an adventure and becomes a boring chore. My hunch is we feel we have finally lured them into our lair, and it is time to get down to the serious and efficient business of those public exams. Of course children must wrestle for basic skills, but even though learning might not always be fun, it ought always to be intriguing. As *Sesame Street* proves, children learn far faster when their curiosity is piqued, when they are given not answers but problems and sent in quest of their own answers. It is not as efficient as 'ingest-and-regurge', but the God we are trying to sensitize them to is quite obviously not as efficient as we would like, either.

Every year, I am amazed how many bright seniors have never read Aesop's fables or Grimm's fairy tales. They have never lived with dragons and unicorns. They do not know the stories which, from time immemorial, have allowed children to understand life and their own selves. Thank God for Luke Skywalker, but they have never heard of Odysseus or Theseus or Psyche, tales that would keep alive the itch for Eden in them. By the time they reach me, they are all too ready for the smart-ass *Weltschmerz* of Holden Caulfield and the winsome pessimism of Kurt Vonnegut.

Take them to the woods and to the beach, away from buildings and billboards, *Playboy* and Saturday cartoons, Trivial Pursuit and Monopoly. Ask if they can feel a presence there, something beyond the sigh of the wind and the harrumph of the waves. It will not improve their grades; it is more a test of what we teachers and parents truly hold important for our children.

Let children's liturgies be *fun*. For God's sake, don't preach to them. Let each one tell what God looks like; let each one tell 'What I like about Sarah is . . .'. Don't do it *for* them. Let the hymns be rousers, what we used to call 'Negro spirituals', effusions which rouse both the natural and the supernatural sides of the soul. And at least by junior high, they should be ready for a weekend retreat – perhaps not yet a purely supernatural one, but one where they can break down their ego-defences in safety, reach out, be vulnerable and unafraid for awhile.

In secondary school, we ought to give at least some time to the same kinds of activities. Granted, a few years ago, we belted the pendulum all the way from the preceptive catechism to the pre-eminent, unchallengeable experiential, and since then have had to give religious education a kind of academic respectability again. But we have over-compensated. One such exercise is 'trust', where one student falls backward and another catches him or her. I have seen boys, who on Saturday skated ninety miles an hour unfazed by being slammed into the boards, turn around maybe five times: 'Now, you're *there*, right? If you *try* anything . . .' Paranoia even among pals. The difference between the hockey game and the exercise was that, on skates, the boy himself was *in charge*. How do we make such a boy vulnerable to God? Not overnight.

In senior year, I spend two quarters studying pop-psychology with boys in RE. Except for an occasional comment, it is rarely overtly religious, and yet if I cannot make them understand how to evolve an adult self, how can I ever stimulate their 'teenage spirituality'? The moral self (*ethos*, character) is not separable from the spiritual self. Thus, we study how purely analytical, left-brain ideas are often half-witted, that we are all victims of the animal Id and the Superego taped from our socialization as children, unless we – at no small effort – wrestle for an Ego: a self, a character, a personally validated ethic. We study Erikson's stages of development and the natural shocks we encounter as we grow, without which we remain children for life. We study not only the differences in sexuality but the androgynous (masculine/feminine) nature of souls, male or female. And we finish with the nine personality types of the Enneagram.

I have never seen any group of classes more sure-fire with seniors than the Enneagram. Even in the class after lunch, the somnambulists are bright-eyed and alert! The reasons are obvious. In the first place, so recently emerged from near autism, teenagers are by definition *self-centred*. Well, if that is where they are, that is where we connect with them. In the second place, the whole purpose of adolescence is the

process of discovering ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I fit into all this?’ As we go through each of the nine personality types, their causes, their assets and liabilities, in *each* class period two or three go, ‘Oh, God!’ They have had a flash of insight about who they are. That is the best ‘place’, because that is what true education is *about*: the thrill of discovery!

Ironically enough, science teachers are especially able to break down the left-brain bias of students and open them to a sense of the numinous – provided they go beyond the confines of the cookbook syllabus. Physics was always the hardest of the ‘hard’ sciences to most people, and still is: the extreme specialization of the analytical mind. From Democritus to Newton and beyond, it had a mechanistic concept of the world, a model in which matter was broken into basic building blocks, passive, leaden. It triumphed in the Cartesian dichotomy between the world (the *res extensa*) and the mind (the *res cogitans*). It was all very neat and predictable.

But since Heisenberg and Einstein and Planck, we know that mass – the hard-edged objects we heft and skin our shins against, the whizzing pellets in the atom – are not really *res extensae* at all! Mass is nothing but a form of energy. Atomic particles do not consist of any basic ‘stuff’, but are bundles of ‘tendencies to exist’. Electrons are both particles and waves at the same time, and there is only a strong probability of finding a particular particle in a particular place at a particular time. As exclusive as God. In the four-dimensional continuum of space-time, you cannot really ask how fast anything is going; the answer is valid only relative to where *you* happen to be standing at the moment. The physicist begins to sound like an Eastern mystic.

As Fritjof Capra wrote in *The Saturday Review* (12/10/77), both modern physics and Eastern mystics ‘emphasize that the universe has to be grasped dynamically as it moves, vibrates, and dances; that nature is not a static equilibrium but that it is a dynamic one’. God and his universe are not nouns but verbs. Both the physicist and the mystic must be

able to attain non-ordinary states of consciousness in which they transcend the three-dimensional world of everyday life to experience a higher, multidimensional reality . . . The survival of our society will depend, ultimately, on our ability to adopt some of the *yin* [‘feminine’] attitudes of Eastern mysticism, to experience the wholeness of nature and the art of living with it in harmony.

Most parents want their children to have ‘the good life’, and they believe that college is the road to such a life, and the public exams are

the narrow gate onto that road. Some spend large amounts of cash for special courses. If Capra is right, they might spend their money more wisely, in the long run, by teaching their children to meditate.

To achieve a teenage spirituality, we must first prove to our young people the undeniable existence of their souls. Then perhaps we can show them the One for whom those souls were made.

## God assured me when I prayed . . .

**B**EING YOUNG AND LIVING in Soweto, I find my experience as a young Catholic is tough because we are caught up in the middle of social and religious events. Despite the fact that we love to know about our faith, there are those who ignore it and tend to devote their lives to other things – mainly their social lives, of course.

It is tough for us because young people have lively minds and think that the Church is for the grown-ups, not for us. Speaking for myself, we young Catholics face a great challenge: we tend to be called names, and labelled 'frustrated' because they say church is for the frustrated ones. But there was a time when I experienced God in my life, and saw that being a party animal is worth nothing. I realized we all turn to ask for help from God, irrespective of whether we are Christians or whether we go to church or not.

I experienced God when I was introduced to the youth group at church. I was very fortunate in this because up till then I had never thought of anyone but myself, not even caring about others. Since I have been in the youth group, I have even learnt to forgive others and I relate much better with the community. I do my best to help those who do not understand the way and the will of God for his people, especially young people, whom we all know are the adults of tomorrow. And not only adults, but responsible adults who must make a difference by reforming the world according to God's will.

The only way for me to prove my experiences is in the way I behave, and by joining hands to work with the other people so as to deepen my faith in God. I thank God for being part of my life, for making my life what it is, and me who I am as a person. Otherwise I would have lost hope in him; instead he assured me when I prayed to him. I am hopeful that through God, with him, in him, I am always in a position to succeed in life; therefore 'I shall never lose his power'.

*Joseph  
South Africa*