

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL EDUCATION?

Graham Ward

DO YOU EVER find yourself singing? The question has become important to me. I don't mean singing in a choir. My voice is not up to doing that. But my home is on the Isle of Mull, close to the beaches on the south peninsula of what is called the Ross. I often find when I'm walking on the beach that I break into song. The song is not always thanksgiving. It can be lamentation. It can be anger at warmongering and lives caught up in collateral damage. But it's still song. Fortunately, the beaches are rarely crowded. And, anyway, gusts of wind, the breaking of waves or the cries of oyster-catchers would prevent much from being heard if there *were* people around.

But there's something about being in the open space, whatever the weather—vast skies with the ocean stretching out towards distant islands, all that air and light—that just makes me want to sing out what I'm feeling. It might be hymns or pop songs, lyrics only half remembered and often made up as needed. Sometimes, they're just rhythms of my own creation that never will be written down. It's the singing of solitude, and its practice has taught me something about human being. I think this inner singing, being developed, is what poetry expresses. I hope it's also prayer. It doesn't come from the cognitive capacities of the mind, but from beneath them, from the spirit.

As poets listen to a music buried in themselves and in the language, they make even everyday words unfamiliar. Take Hopkins, for instance:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*¹

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame', in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 141.

That verse is full of the sound and rhythms that make up song: thanksgiving, in this case—and it isn't always the case with Hopkins. In being expressed, it says something about a spiritual work; for there is a healing and a reparation in singing—even in lamentation. Those key themes of song and solitude—where the 'being indoors each one dwells' relates to and syncs with being outside, breathing in light—are what I wish to focus on in attempting to answer a very simple question: what is a spiritual education?

Two scriptures, both by St Paul, will structure what I want to say, along with a single Latin word: *persona*. From *persona* we get the word 'person', and personhood is what we are concerned with here: the salvation of the unique, enfleshed, spatially and temporally located individual. *What I do is me: for that I came. My life is my witness.* But if you take *persona* back to its Latin root, it's formed from two bits of the Latin language, the main part being *sonere*, to sound, with the suffix *per* which means 'through'. So a *persona* is that through which sound sounds. We'll return to that.

The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God

Now for those scriptures: the first is 1 Corinthians 2:11. 'For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.' What I want to draw attention to here is the repetition of the word 'spirit' (the Greek *pneuma* in both cases). However much there is an infinite difference between the divine and the human, there remains a spiritual communication across an analogical order in which human spirit encounters divine Spirit. By *analogical* here I only mean that there is a greater dissimilarity with respect to God within any similarity drawn. The Spirit of God works in, through and upon the human spirit. The human spirit is not some floating ectoplasm, some ghost in the machine. It's the breath of life itself, organic *and* transcendent because it's not ours alone and relates us to other breathing creatures, and to God.

Furthermore, we cannot have thoughts (about ourselves, other creatures or God) without consciousness and the brain; and in these aspects of being human the cognitive and the physiological cannot be divorced. In fact, the more we are learning about the relationship between the neurological and cognitive, and how emotions, moods and imagination work within and upon different levels of consciousness,

the more we are coming to see ourselves as, paradoxically, both closed and open biological systems.

The system is closed biologically because it is self-determining, self-protective and self-regulating. The system is open because it receives, feeds on and responds to all that is outside itself: the social, the non-human and the natural. We live in and through our entanglement with all that composes the evolving environment—natural, social and cultural. There are circulations between these open systems, both active and reactive, both processing and determining: creative energies, biological and psychological; and destructive energies that inhibit, such as fear, violence and starvation.

Human being, then, is subject to continual change, adaptation and transformation on three levels. According to St Paul, these are the body (*soma*), the mind (*psuchê*) and the spirit (*pneuma*). All of which make possible *metanoia*, the change of mind and orientation that we associate, as Christians, with repentance, or with the reorientation of a direction, a living-towards. Human being is not a name of an entity but a genus, *Homo*. And there were many forms of *Homo*, some of them co-existing for some time—a time far longer than *Homo sapiens sapiens* has been alone.

Being human is a praxis, a verbal noun, being and becoming human. Personhood involves various performative actions. In its operations, internally and externally, it is continually becoming and being. That's what living involves: becoming (growing up, maturing and growing old) and absorbing, responding and adapting to conditions, whether they be good or bad. And—just one more point—all that becoming is made possible by breathing. So, a person's spirit, *pneuma*, is related (as the word *pneuma* is related) to breathing. Once we stop breathing, we die.

'Spirit' here, a person's spirit, operates on the two other levels: breath (the body, the biological) and that which stirs within and forges cognitive processes (the mind, consciousness in all its complex concealments). In *De trinitate*, Augustine points out that God works through the Spirit of Christ so that He is written into the very structures of our mind and deep calls to deep. Spirit functions, then, at a level beneath what the psychologists call the unconscious. So the spirit has no language beyond bodily gestures, faint feelings, cries of joy or pain—what might be called the song that is one's flesh.

The scriptural verse adds to the human spirit, somewhat anthropomorphically, God-consciousness operating also through the Holy



The creation of Adam, mosaic, twelfth or thirteenth century, Monreale cathedral, Sicily

Spirit. I'm not going to go into the obvious Trinitarian implications of this, except to say there *are* implications. Very good ones. But I am going to focus instead on the way this description of *pneuma* returns us to Genesis and to God breathing the breath of life into the nostrils of an androgynous clay figure and, in this way, animating the human. The word for this breath of God in the Septuagint is, once again, *pneuma*. All this suggests that God's breathing is intimately associated, at some spiritual depth we can never grasp as such, with our own breathing,

our being alive as biological systems open to what life gives us and what we make of it. At this point, all I wish to do with this observation is note that spirituality begins here, sustained by a divine operation working in, through and beyond creation, and deeper than the realms psychology can plumb.

Service and Stewardship

The second scriptural verse is 1 Corinthians 4: 1: 'Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries'. In this context, what I have said about 1 Corinthians 2: 11—that which we receive as the Holy Spirit works within and upon our human spirit—is now given a social orientation. In the words of Hopkins, the 'being indoors each one dwells' now encounters other creatures, human and non-human.

What has been received has to be passed on, and in being passed on bears witness. Our spirituality, our spiritual education, is not simply some private sanctification. If it operates in and through our bodies, its orientation is the edification of the body of Christ, our *communio sanctorum*. This is fundamentally where Christian spirituality differs from exercises in mindfulness and well-being—though certainly we might

learn something from those practices, and I don't want at all to suggest that I dismiss their therapeutic capabilities. Like the work of salvation, which they can augment, they can heal.

Salvation and formation, which are what spirituality is all about (not mystical translations to another realm), work in and through us. So, what we receive we have to give. Otherwise, like the manna collected by the Israelites and kept overnight, the spirituality will not nourish but sicken. We can't keep the gospel to ourselves. Again: our living is our witnessing. Spiritual work testifies; it bears witness, because it is forming predispositions and behaviours. Our spiritual formation is for the formation of the body of Christ. And form is an emergent property: it cannot be predicted or prescribed. It's too complex a phenomenon and too entangled with biological and cultural (and therefore pedagogical) evolution.

Paul allots two roles in that passing on of what we have received. The first role is 'servants of Christ' and the second role is 'stewards of God's mysteries'. These roles emerge from the formation and they shape it; they are not independent administrative offices. The exercise of stewardship is grounded in being disposed to humility and the behaviour that follows: serving. There is a difference between the roles, and a development. A 'servant of Christ' is an assistant under the command of a superior, a *hupêtas*. And that can mean anything from mopping up vomit in toilets of the parish room to preparing food and drinks for tonight's feast.

Unless our servitude is in place—that is, worked out within us as a fundamental predisposition—we cannot develop the next role we are asked to perform (and Paul is talking about his own divine vocation here). The steward is a servant, but with far more responsibilities for the ordering and maintenance of order within the house. The steward has greater pastoral oversight, and to take on such a role a spiritual development of that fundamental predisposition of servitude has got to be worked out, and worked out thoroughly. We are not talking line-management here.

I have a rather curtailed MBA from the University of Manchester, in management and leadership, and although it taught me a lot about my limitations as a manager and also a handful of techniques, 'stewardship of God's mysteries' requires a more profound education in serving and being served. It is founded in being small enough (another name for humility) to sacrifice. I take Christ's descent from the cross as the leading

example here. And that means suffering. Excellence in administration is not necessarily a qualification for the role of being a steward of the mysteries and the greater formation of the body of Christ.

What I like about Paul's metaphor here is its groundedness. There were mystery religions and mystery cults throughout the Graeco-Roman world. They were secretive and highly selective, governed by priests (for Mithras) and priestesses (for Isis). Paul is not having any of that, and his use of 'stewards' make that plain. There are mysteries here, but the steward is not the guardian of any cult, possessed by oracular powers or, necessarily, personal charisma. The steward is a labourer who has been formed in his or her servitude to Christ.

That person knows that his or her own salvation, his or her private sanctification is nothing—a self-righteous fantasy—unless it builds up the body of Christ, through working alongside others with different callings and formations. The recognition of difference is vital here. We are each becoming human in different ways, with different backgrounds (cultural, biographical and even linguistic), along different destinies, with distinct spiritualities though participating in the one Spirit. All of which works through and across time for the upbuilding of the body of Christ by giving expression to, witnessing and testifying to, 'God's mysteries'. Stewards are not mystics: they are wise; they are prudent.

Hiddenness

Now, let me say something now about those 'mysteries'. For while *mysterion* indicates something that is secret, for Paul, God's revelation has made known what was once unknown. So, while the word retains a sense of concealment, stewardship is bringing to light those things now revealed in Christ. Our lives, Paul states in Colossians 3:3, are 'hidden [*kekruptai*] with Christ in God'. With concealments being revealed in and our own lives being hidden in Christ, we are not talking about ecstatic utterances or experiences here. We are embodied creatures. Whatever we experience, we experience in and through our embodiment. But the location or sphere within which that embodiment is placed is 'Christ'. The whole biological order is rooted in Christ the Pantocrator. We are *in* Christ, a dative locative in Greek. Christ is not just a historical figure but also a realm in which we move, the Logos by whom and in whom all things were created. Only God can be both personal and simultaneously a realm of operations.

Much of what goes on with respect to those divine operations we can only guess at in our very human and limited ways. Just as our thoughts are not God's thoughts, and we cannot surpass our creaturely limitations, so *much* about the workings of salvation and formation (which are, as I said, what spirituality is all about) is hidden from us—hidden since the realm of the spirit (*pneuma*) is only partially available to cognition and language (*psychê*). This is what is meant by 'mysteries'. We don't know where the lines can be drawn between nature and grace, what is created and what is uncreated. Our lives are 'hidden'; our futures are 'hidden'; the operations of God with respect to providence (my destiny or the destiny of anyone else) are hidden. 'No one has ever seen God', John's Gospel tells us (1:18). We have to trust, abide, have faith. That does not mean there is nothing we can say or do. A steward must both say and do. But the source of that saying or doing, and its consequences for ourselves and other people, are mainly hidden from us. The source of the spring is concealed. Those familiar with Hopkins's poetry recognise how frequently he refers to this secret spring.

Spiritual education must come to terms with 'hiddenness'. It's what faith requires. Hiddenness installs the need for faith. We don't know where we're going and sometimes have very little grasp of what we are doing. That is the condition of being 'hidden with Christ in God' and becoming, in the deepening of our relationship and trust in Christ, ever more aware of hidden and secret springs within us, of which we are the stewards. This condition gives rise to a paradox: as stewards we are workers actively pursuing and delivering a service; but what we are administering is 'hidden' (often even from us). Let's put that paradox under the microscope for a moment because it's at the heart of spiritual education.

We live; we breathe; we act and are acted upon. We move and are moved. We do not know when or where that movement will stop, and most of us do not know whether the stoppage will be abrupt or the result of a gradual winding down. We feel ourselves held in God's providential care. We follow; we are led; the shepherd goes before; we have learnt his name and learnt, too, that we are known. But in our following and being led we do not just sit waiting, in words from *The Sound of Music*, 'for fate to turn the light on'. We have appointments, services, meetings, correspondence, projects, plans, things to say to bishops, opinions *The Tablet* needs to know about and so on. We are active, sometimes overactive, in following after.

There's the paradox, and like all paradoxes this one involves a cross-hatching of tensions. The tensions emerge from the ripples of contrary movements, and what makes the centre hold is Christ, and the spiritual formation in Christ. What provides the ballast is our education in Christ, into all those things hidden in Christ and in the Godhead. We live; we breathe; we act and are acted upon, in and through a spiritual pedagogy that follows in the lines of grace: an education of ourselves for the benefit of a salvation offered to all. Biographies count. Nothing, I believe, is lost; however faulty my memory becomes the older I get. All is gathered up in a sanctification divine in origin and end. Our living and breathing educates us, and that education constitutes our witness to the glory of God. And without that belief we are just faffing and floundering because a lot of living seems to involve faffing and floundering.

Education and Formation

Our education here is not at all like doing GCSEs, or A levels, or even degrees. Modern education—I speak as one who has spent his career immersed in it—is instrumental. It is geared to acquiring skill sets and the efficient processing of information. Spiritual education is not at all instrumental. It's about salvation, being formed, eternal life. It is less about acquiring than letting go and being open. It is less about equipping than the transformation of dispositions and predispositions—a transformation that comes about by a reorientation of desires. Skills may be acquired, including coping skills with what life gives and what life takes. But, however many techniques we learn, from breath-control to feet placed firmly on the ground, from meandering in silence to the endless repetition of the Jesus prayer, none of them, in themselves, trigger the flow and direction of grace. No doubt you have tried every one of them, as I have, and sometimes there seems to be a pay-off, and most times there isn't. Spiritual operations are governed by a set of techniques.

We need to go right back to some ancient notions and languages. From *paideia* in Greek we get *pedagogy* and *paediatrics*; *pedes* is a foot and so education is a learning how to walk, a way to live correctly. *E-ducere* in Latin means to lead out; *ductus* is a route or path. Christian education, spiritual education, is a leading out along the way. And the way is Christ. We don't know the way, or the truth; that is all part of the 'treasures of wisdom and knowledge' that are 'hidden' in Christ (Colossians 2:3).

We do know something about life, beyond systems biology: life not as the name of something that scientists are seeking to replicate with chains of various fatty acids, but rather life as what we live and experience, breathing in a specific time, in a specific place, in a specific body—me, mine. ‘Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*’, in Hopkins’s words.

So we are led out, spiritually, intellectually, physiologically, emotionally into the mysteries and the concealments of which we are stewards. And what is emerging is a form that is con-formed to Christ (Romans 8: 29). To answer the question of what is formed in this process is absolutely right, but also absolutely abstract. This is too close to a mathematical formula to be of use in understanding what is taking place in and around us. And what exactly is it that is being ‘formed’? What is being formed in spiritual formation? Let’s start with what is not being formed.

Form is not a one-size-fits-all template. The character being formed is you, and you are an utterly unique creation. Hopkins again: ‘Selves—goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells’. If we take Paul’s metaphor of the different organs of the body (1 Corinthians 12), the eye’s formation is not the same as the foot’s. And who can name what part they are playing in the body of Christ? No doubt there are surprising formations which do not conform with social or cultural norms, especially the strong social and cultural expectations that operate within churches.

Furthermore, the form is always *forming* as you are *living*. It emerges with the transformation of fundamental predispositions and intentional orientations. It’s very much like the processes of artistic creation. As an artist, you can copy what’s out there, or you can allow what’s out there to shape something in you that becomes an expressive response. Any number of creative artists will speak about the labours of working with instinct and intuition, of not



Self-Portrait, by William Orpen, c. 1924

knowing what will emerge or how it will emerge. And most, when a form is found, are aware of its imperfections. They have worked the material—words or paint, musical notes or marble—but often what has emerged surprises them: it's original, it's authentic, it's something new. When Mark Rothko finished a painting he would sit in silence before it mesmerised by what had appeared.

The same thing holds for conformity to Christ. In the end, to cite Paul again, form is about coming to that place where 'I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Form concerns the shaping of the personhood that will stand before Christ and know even as I am known. Personhood emerges from life experiences held in prayer: how the details of my life, its chances, changes and circumstances, have led me to be the person I am—and have eternally always been—in Christ. Sometimes we can trace the transformations that have occurred over the tempering of time—transformations of attitude, of reaction and response, as we have learnt to love better (ourselves, others, Christ). But we will, I think, be surprised about who we are and what we have become when we know 'even as I have been fully known'.

Spiritual formation is, if you like, the realisation of the old oracle: know yourself. But the knowledge here, like the education which brought it about, is far more profound than the therapeutics of psychologists, because it is rooted in the movements of *pneuma*, in the human spirit in relation to the divine spirit, not just *psychê*—the life of the mind. Spiritual formation can learn much about mental health from mindfulness and well-being programmes but is not ultimately a self-help therapy. While it is absolutely centred in you, you do not belong to yourself. Your spiritual formation is only about your own salvation to the extent it is about the operation of salvation itself, in and through the work it does—through time, through biological evolution and entanglement, cultural location and every single one of the people around you—to bring about conformity in Christ.

In Romans 8:29, when Paul speaks about that conformity, the Greek word he uses is *summorphous*. We are to be formed-with, formed in accordance with, the image of Christ. That formation takes place *in* Christ. We do not become little copies of what we think being Christ looks like. Every single thing *you* have experienced works together, repairing and transforming so that you will know even as you are known: your sufferings, your bereavements, your confusions, your failings and

your brilliant successes, your joys and sorrows, the people you have hurt and the hurt you have received, your pathological insecurities and your assured well-being. Everything is gathered up into Christ, recapitulated, as both Paul and Irenaeus will say.² It is part of your providential education: following, being led, by faith.

We don't know what we will finally look like. We don't know what our spiritual formation has brought about and is bringing about. We don't know what we are as those who are saved; or what the appearance of that condition looks like. And yet, I think, one of the first things we will come to know is that we have never belonged to ourselves. Our biographies are only fragments of trillions of intersecting biographies that relay across the human species itself. We have only ever been, and will only ever be, servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. We have taken on the masks or roles that have been given to us—father, mother, brother, sister, teacher, priest, friend, lover, expert in AI, poet, preacher, neighbour and so on. It is through wearing these masks and playing these roles that our lives have been lived and our persons have been formed. Masks do not signify false identities here. It is just that in every situation we present to others only one face of the multiple faces that compose us.

***We have
never
belonged to
ourselves***

Sounding Through

We are back with that word *persona*, which can indeed mean mask as it can mean, extended, *dramatis personae*, the cast list for a divine drama. We have arrived at spiritual formation as discovering one's personhood 'hidden with Christ in God'. This is our salvation and, because we do not belong to ourselves, it brings the dynamic of salvation into every other relationship that has crafted that sense of our being a uniquely created person.

No one else can live the life you live, just as no one else can die in your place. We will know even as we are known *in* Christ and *by* Christ. We become *personae Christi*—those who have been sounded through by Christ, voiced beyond and yet through our own voice, so that our calling calls out, testifies, bears witness. What our formation concerns is the formation of the body of Christ, and just as sacrifice

² See, for example, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1.

was intrinsic to the work of salvation on the cross, so sacrifice is intrinsic to formation. In this continuing donation and giving over of oneself, the body of Christ is extended, which is nothing more nor less than a eucharistic celebration.

The process of redemption continues, drawing all things into Christ so that we and the whole of creation can be given to the Father and all things ‘in heaven and on earth and under the earth’ (Philippians 2:10) are submitted. This is our participation in the redemption of time (Ephesians 5:16), effected by the Spirit in and through our prayers for the future and for the reconciliation and forgiveness of what is past. That is the present work—in us, through us and for us—until all things are brought to the light and are illuminated with grace, as grace, crafted in the beauty of their divine arrangement and donated in love.

Per-sonere—to sound through. Perhaps this gives you some sense of why I think singing is important. We are the song that is written in us, as us. We are, ultimately, prayer. God’s presence with us and in us, in our longing (for we will always desire), is prayer. So who is praying? We can stop sometimes to listen to that song, that praying—thanksgiving, intercession, even lament—welling up,

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Which is where we began.

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