

## THE POTATINESS OF POTATOES

A friend from Switzerland, who used to spend summers with a favorite aunt, remembers asking her once what she thought about as she peeled potatoes. He never forgot her reply. Without looking up from her task, she answered, “I just think about the *potatiness* of potatoes.”

Without even realizing it, she touched upon one of the most fundamental aspects of practice. The fundamental question of what things are “in themselves” seems so simple. Intuitively, we know exactly what she meant; yet it evades analysis and satisfactory expression. If we try to probe this intellectually, we end in confusion; but, if we rely on our own direct experience, based upon full attention, then our experience shows us that when we regard something with our full attentiveness, we can feel the character and quality of the object in a way that a self-interested or token glance can never provide. By giving to events and things our special fullness of attention, we allow them to speak to us, and this in turn, informs us about their nature and leads us to show them respect.

The poets, as usual, have something to teach us here. The English Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. (1844-1889) used the terms “inscape” and “instress” to refer to this more intense quality and experience of things observed. He believed that, by allowing one’s attention to be drawn to a bird in flight, a tree, a landscape, a human event, will allow its character to act upon us. In one poem, he describes feeling this as “the dearest freshness deep down things.”

And the eighteenth century poet, philosopher and litterateur Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), said that he discovered the true nature of things by what he called “seeing with exactitude,” a form of contemplative looking. This matters. It matters deeply, because how we “see” things and other people profoundly affects how we regard them, how we relate to them and how we conduct our lives.

In his Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) wrote:

I shall ponder with much affection how much the Lord God has done for me, and how much the Lord God has given me and how much the same Lord God desires to give to me according to divine decrees.

Ignatian contemplation invites us to see a drama unfolding in our daily lives; to wit, everything in the world is God’s gift, an expression of God’s active love for us. The Spirit labors in and through these gifts and invites us to join in that labor. This sense of life as a divine drama into which we are invited lies at the heart of

the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988). He believed that all contemplatives could engage in a mysticism of ordinary life and thus become, in his words, “contemplatives in action.” He looked to the world before us, just as it is given to us. In its events and beauties are to be found the expressions of the life of God incarnate in the world. He suggested that lay contemplative life is “symphonic”: that is, an organic and dynamic display of divine love, the recognition of the majesty of divine love appearing before us and striking us with wonder, setting our hearts on fire, like those of the first disciples and the Church Fathers before us.

In his view, the absence of more widespread contemplative practice has resulted in a lost ability to see a deeper goodness in the world, and therefore, its divine and transcendent origin. In the cultures of classic Greece and Rome, the cosmos had been understood as saturated with the divine; the world was a stage upon which human and divine actors participated together in the cosmic drama. Modern society no longer sees existence this way. The contemporary person looks upon an empty and meaningless horizon of cosmic chaos. Sacred and secular have become separate realms. Reflection on the world has become the exclusive domain of science. Forgotten is a universe alive and saturated with the life of God.

To counter this false dichotomy, a recovery of the sacramental vision found in the Desert Fathers and the Spiritual Exercises is necessary. These sources reveal to us through contemplative practice the divine drama unfolding all around us. To perceive what God has done for us, is doing for us, requires an act of surrender. Contemplative practice is about abandoning self and allowing God to be God in us. It is about letting the love and compassion of our own Christ-nature show us the depth and greatness of divine love, divine action, in our life. We are all called to be saints. We are all called to live out, each in his or her own way, our unique version of Christ. The Way is in everyone, although not everyone is on the Way.

Balthasar wrote:

Prayer is something more than an exterior act, performed out of a sense of duty, an act in which we tell God various things God already knows, a kind of daily attendance upon a Sovereign who awaits the submission of subjects. Even though people find, to their pain and sorrow, that their prayer never rises above this level, they well know that it needs to be something more. Somewhere, here, there, is a hidden treasure, if only I could dig it up – a seed which has the power to grow into a mighty tree bearing abundant flowers and fruits, if only I have the will to cultivate it.

In the same vein, Thomas Merton, in his work *Life and Holiness*, wrote:

The work of giving ourselves to God, of renouncing the world is deeply serious, admitting of no compromise. It is not enough to meditate on a way of perfection, which includes sacrifice, prayer and renunciation of the world. We have ... to become interior persons if we are ever going to hear the voice of God within us. It is not enough simply to make all perfection consist in active works and to say that the observances and duties imposed on us are by themselves sufficient to transform our whole lives in Christ.... The mere fact of becoming a well-working cog in an efficient religious machine will never make anyone into a saint if that one fails to seek God interiorly in the sanctuary of the soul.... The one who simply “works for” God exteriorly may lack that interior love for God which is necessary for true perfection. Love seeks not only to serve God, but to know God, to commune with God in prayer, to abandon itself to God in contemplation.

The seed which can grow into a mighty and fruitful tree is not somewhere else. It is right here in your own heart and mind, and cultivating it is our practice. The quintessential medium for cultivating our practice and the interior life, for being intimate with Ultimate Reality and seeing things as they are in themselves, is attention. Through the simple act of attention, one initiates a new alignment of energy and forces. Maintenance of conscious attention, though, is not easy – you already know this. The movement and obligations of daily life constantly distract.

There is a Sufi story of a man who had been inattentive throughout his life. After passing through the trauma of death, he found himself seated facing a high wall, which revolved gradually before his eyes. It was made known to him that once every thousand years a gate would come level with where he sat, the gate leading into Paradise, momentarily open to him. He must wait in patience for that moment and then seize the opportunity to step into eternal joy. There is, the Qur’an tells us, just such a wall separating the blessed from the condemned, “a wall wherein is a gate; the inner side encompasses grace and mercy, the outer faces toward perdition.”

For 999 years, 11 months and many days, this man waited patiently, never taking his eyes from the wall which revolved inch by inch before him. No other thought occupied his mind but the prospect of the Garden of Paradise, its palaces, its peerless maidens and delicious fruits. But there came a moment when some distraction diverted his attention, a memory perhaps of the world he had left behind. Whatever it was, his attention wavered and it was in that moment that the gate drew level with the place of waiting and then continued on its unending round. Another thousand years of attentiveness lay before him.

We speak of the insane as those who have lost touch with reality, and that surely is a tragedy, but to lose touch with the One Reality is a disaster so momentous we cannot even access its extent. We are born with an awareness of Ultimate Reality, which we call God. It is embedded in us. But over time we become busy. There is much to distract us in this world. It is like the young child who said to the newborn, "Remind me what God looks like. I am beginning to forget." We forget and as a consequence our inner life stands in grave danger.

To forget God is to be absent from God, and if this forgetfulness becomes habitual, then the absence is perpetual. On the other hand, the reward for remembrance is beyond measure. To remember is to attend. To pay attention, to wake up, is to be fully here and now, and it is only here in this place and now in this moment that God is to be found and the encounter with reality to be consummated. Opening to the force of attention evokes a sense of wholeness and equilibrium. One can then glimpse the possibility of a state of awareness immeasurably superior to that of a reactive life. However, the attention is not "mine." In a moment of its presence, one knows that it does not originate entirely with one's self. Its source surrounded by mystery, attention communicates energies of a quality the mind cannot represent. One needs to be at the service of conscious attention: one prepares for its coming through silence and stillness.

Cleared of internal noise, conscious attention is an instrument which vibrates like a crystal at its own frequency. It is free to receive the signals broadcast at each moment, from each person and thing, from a creative universe in communication with all creatures. We cannot force it to happen. We can only, through this wonderful practice, create the conditions which make it possible.

Our practice encompasses all of daily life. When we practice with full attention as much as possible, the divine drama presents itself to us. The *potatiness* of potatoes awaits our discovery. We have only to open our eyes, empty our minds, look deeply and "see."