

The Human Face of God

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*"A Collection of Stories and Biblical Reflections
on the Spiritual Life"*

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Introduction



The introduction of a book is intended to be like a road map. It gives the reader guidance and direction to travel more easily from chapter to chapter. Much like a road map facilitates the journey so that one can reach their final destination without getting off course, I hope this introduction will provide a clear point of departure for the reader.

My purpose for writing this book is not to add one more book to the list of religious books. Indeed, for me, books that are labeled “religious” oftentimes tend to be sectarian or exclusive. Instead, I hope this book will encourage a broader way of looking at, and relating to God. Although, as a Catholic, I may see things from a Catholic perspective, I have made every attempt to be inclusive of other spiritual points of view. To this end, I have incorporated the insights of authors from a variety of Christian and Jewish traditions. I have often found that their perspectives enrich my own spiritual life, and I hope that their insights will enrich the reader as well.

When I explored a possible symbol or metaphor that could hold this narrative together, I continually found myself returning to the image of the face. As the chapters begin to unfold, the reader will notice the use of the image as it appears in the Scriptures and

other spiritual works. I marvel as I am continuously reminded of the image as it occurs in the ordinary moments of daily life.

Consider in your own human experience the power of the symbol of the face. Whether it is the dignified face of Lincoln sculpted on Mt. Rushmore, the face the Old Man of the Mountain, carved by the passage of time on the granite cliffs of New Hampshire, the grotesque bloodied face of the crucified Christ on the cover of *Time*, or the photograph of the lovely face of a deceased parent or spouse taken during happy times, the image of the human face always seems to evoke a powerful emotional response.

Perhaps that is why the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures employ the symbol of the face to express certain attributes and characteristics of God's personality. For instance, Jeremiah, the prophet, records God's disapproval when he writes, "For I have set my face against the city." To express God's favor and blessing, the author of the book of Numbers writes, "The Lord let his face shine upon you. The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace." Similarly, God speaks through the Prophet Ezekiel saying, "No longer will I hide my face from them, for I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel." And, the psalmist invokes God's divine favor by uttering the words, "Lord of hosts restore us; let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."

While the Old Testament records these or similar words about the face of God, ironically, not much is said in the New Testament about the face of Jesus. References about the face of Jesus are virtually non-existent, and nowhere to be found is a detailed description of Jesus' physical appearance. That such a basic description is missing from the earliest accounts of the life of the earthly Jesus is perhaps by coincidence or by design. Nevertheless, no physical description of Jesus was ever given to us by those who knew him and saw his face.

As a result, the following pages are an invitation to the reader to rediscover and recognize the face of Jesus, as he continues to

reveal himself in the faces of the young, the old, the poor the affluent, the wounded, the wise, the neglected, the contented, the abused, the hopeful, the courageous, the despised, the fearful, the sick, the healthy, and the ordinary. It is in these ordinary faces that he is continually trying to reveal himself to us and to the world. And, just as we can unexpectedly recognize a familiar face in a crowd, it can be said of the human face of God that while it is often partially hidden and obscured, it is also waiting to be recognized and rediscovered in the faces of ordinary people and ordinary moments.

I hope that this collection of personal stories, prayers, poems and spiritual writings will assist the reader to begin to search for the face of Jesus in the ordinary moments, events, and struggles of daily life. In time I hope that we can all begin to understand, at least in part, that trust, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, courage and hope, all have a human face. And by the end of the final chapter the reader will realize that we are all invited to become human faces of God in our own lives and in the lives of others.

With this, the “road map” portion of this narrative comes to a close. Without further delay, I invite the reader to begin a journey of rediscovering the human face of God. I pray that as you travel along your own particular road that God will let his face shine upon you, be gracious unto you, and give you mercy, courage and peace.

Trust Has a Face



It was just after daybreak, as the sun began to rise over the horizon, when they observed him from their boat. Standing next to a charcoal fire, with fish and bread on it, he waited on the shore of Galilee. In a voice unmistakably his, he said, ““Bring some of the fish you have just caught. Come and eat.” After they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.” Peter answered three times. Ironically, it had also been next to a charcoal fire in a courtyard, that Peter had denied knowing him three times. And then Jesus said to the fisherman, “I am telling you the truth: when you were young, you used to get ready and go anywhere you wanted to; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you up and take you where you don’t want to go.”¹

A KNOCK AT MIDNIGHT

Shortly after midnight on July 28, 1981, three members of a Guatemalan death squad knocked on the door of a little village rectory where Fr. Stan Rother, the village priest, lay sleeping. Roused

from his sleep, Fr. Stan had feared that such a knock would come in the middle of the night. He had been back at his post in the village of Santiago de Atitlan since the spring of the same year, when he had been warned by his family, back in Oklahoma, not to go back to the village. But how could, he not return, he thought. Who would shepherd his flock? With so much civil unrest in the countryside, who would care for the needs of the people?

In loud, threatening voices, Stan was ordered to go with them immediately. Fearing that he would be tortured, Stan resisted, struggled, and fought with all his strength. It was three against one, but surely he could overpower his would-be abductors. After all, as a young man, he had been a farmer and was the son of Oklahoma farmers. Now, 46, his body, lean and muscular, had been tempered and weather-beaten by the hard work of the Guatemalan countryside. But, alas, with all his might, he could not overpower the strength of three men with their weapons of death. Like a loud cry of a wounded sparrow his words echoed into the moonlit night, "No, I won't go with you! You'll have to kill me here!"² Suddenly the terrifying sounds of gunshots filled the village sky, and Fr. Stan lay still.

The following morning the people of Santiago de Atitlan and the surrounding villages felt a mixture of outrage and sorrow at the news of the murder of their parish priest. "Padre Aplas" as Fr. Stan was known by the people, had been their friend and companion for the past thirteen years. Since his arrival in 1968, Stan had learned their native language, visited their humble homes, taught them to plant new crops for their families, and built their local clinic. In their eyes, "Padre Aplas" had become repairman, carpenter, chauffeur, farmer, counselor, and friend. Most of all, he had been their spiritual guide. He had presided at their baptisms, weddings, funerals and feasts. Now over 3,000 of them, mostly poor, rural Indians had gathered to say goodbye. The next day, his body would be flown back to be laid to rest in the little country

cemetery of Okarche, Oklahoma. But in accordance with the burial customs of the Tzutuhil Indians, his heart would be buried underneath the altar of the little village church in Santiago de Atitlan. Today a headstone marks his grave site in the Oklahoma countryside. His parents, Frank and Gertrude, had these words inscribed in the granite stone, Stanley Rother—"Padre Aplas." For some months prior to his murder, Stan Rother knew that he, like Peter the fisherman, would have to stretch out his arms and be led to a place where he did not want to go. The warnings of villagers, coworkers, and family had not been able to dissuade him from returning to his flock in time to preside at Holy Week services. Knowing that perhaps the terrifying knock of his tormentors would come in the middle of the night as he lay sleeping, he had taken to the habit of going to bed fully clothed, so that if need be he could escape into the night at a moment's notice. Perhaps compelled by an even greater fear that harm could come to his parishioners if he tried to escape, Stan was willing to submit himself over to the will of God.

Surrendering to the will of God is also a powerful theme throughout the life of Jesus. For example, the gospel writers record that Jesus had to confront an experience of terror near the end of his own life. A number of times before his arrest, trial and execution, he told his own disciples that he would have to face a terrible death. And so, we read that it was in the Garden of Gethsemane, before his arrest, that he prayed, "Father," he said, "if you will, take this cup of suffering away from me. Not my will, however, but your will be done."³ Ironically, some thirty-three years before Gethsemane, a young Jewish woman, her heart trembling with fear, in response to the message of an angel that she would conceive and bear a son, uttered similar words in a prayer that said, "I am the Lord's servant, may it happen to me as you have said."⁴ In this sense, Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane reminds us of the prayer once uttered by his mother at the time of his conception.

From the time that I was just a little boy, I, too, learned a prayer of surrendering to God by heart; although, growing up, I never really grasped the depth of its meaning. Often I have said the prayer in silence, sometimes in worship, other times in joy, in sorrow, or somewhere in between. But, always I have repeated it, mindful that it was the first prayer taught to me by my mother. In part it says, “thy will be done: on earth as it is in heaven.” For the longest time, the part of the Lord’s Prayer that struck me as the most difficult to put into practice seemed to me to be the part that says, “and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” However, the older I get, and the longer I live, I am now of the opinion that the hardest part to put into practice is, “your will be done.” After all, this requires me to begin and end each and every day with the realization that God, not I, is ultimately in control of all that I am, and all that I seek to do.

A LITTLE BOY TRUSTS HIS MOTHER

A story is told about another little boy in *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life* by Hannah Whitall Smith. It goes like this:

A Christian lady was once expressing to a friend how impossible she found it to say, “Thy will be done,” and how afraid she would be to do it. She was the mother of an only little boy, who was the heir to a great fortune, and the idol of her heart. After she had stated her difficulties fully, her friend said, “Suppose your little Charley should come running to you tomorrow and say, ‘Mother I have made up my mind to let you have your own way with me from this time forward. I am always going to obey you, and I want you to do just whatever you think best with me. I will trust your love.’” “How would you feel towards him? Would you say to yourself, ‘Ah, now I have a chance to make Charley miserable? I will take away all his pleasures, and fill his life with every hard and disagreeable thing that I can find. I will compel him to do just the things that are the most difficult for

him to do, and will give him all sorts of impossible commands.’ “Oh, no, no, no!” exclaimed the indignant mother. “You know I would not. You know I would hug him to my heart and cover him with kisses, and would hasten to fill his life with all that was sweetest and best.” “And are you more tender and loving than God?” asked her friend. “Ah no!” was the reply. “I see my mistake. Of course I must not be any more afraid of saying, ‘Thy will be done,’ to my heavenly Father than I would want my Charley to be of saying it to me.”⁵

Over time, I have come to understand how difficult it is to say “Thy will be done” and to be willing to relinquish control of my life to a loving heavenly Father. I want to be willing, like Peter, the fisherman, to have a belt tied around my own waist, to be able to stretch out my arms in complete trust and vulnerability, and to be willing to be led to a place I would rather not go.

In the summer of 1995 I was appointed by my religious superiors to serve as the leader of the major seminary in San Antonio, Texas. Under the most normal of circumstances, the most seasoned and experienced priest would find taking on this responsibility a most daunting and difficult task. However, my circumstances were anything but normal. At the age of thirty-four, and only nine years ordained a priest, I would be the youngest person in the country to hold this position. In fact, over the five years that I attended national and regional meetings of rectors of major seminaries in the United States, often I would be the only person in the entire room with a full head of black, not gray, hair.

I must confess that, in spite of my inexperience and shortcomings, many of my colleagues turned out to be very supportive and encouraging. A good number of them went out of their way to include me and make me feel welcomed. Their acceptance made my job easier, because, over time, it made me feel that I must be up to the task if they were willing to include me so readily. Nevertheless, there were many days when I struggled to trust and

relinquish control of my situation to God. In my mind, I believed I was trusting God, but often I would slip back into the pattern of trying to control and micromanage people and the outcomes of a variety of situations. Often I would say, “thy will be done,” however, I would hope that God would do my will, instead.

During those difficult years as leader of the seminary, one of the most important revelations I had was coming across a prayer, in a book of prayers that I photocopied and read daily. I began to stick it in my shirt pocket every morning at the start of each day before heading out the front door of my residence. Even after I committed the prayer to memory, I would still carry a copy of the prayer in my pocket every day, as a constant reminder of the need to submit my will over to the will of God. The prayer says simply:

The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to. It is content with the low places that people disdain. Thus it is like the Tao. In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep to the simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don't try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present. When you are content to be simply yourself, and don't compare or compete, everybody will respect you.⁶

Often, during the course of a day, I would pause and read the prayer over and over again. Many times my eyes would gravitate toward the line that says, “In governing don't try to control.” Over time, I decided that I would try to do my best in my new job, and then leave the rest up to God. One day while walking across the seminary campus, I stopped and read these words inscribed on a bronze marker, “ESTABLISHED IN 1915.” At that moment it occurred to me that the seminary had been in existence long before I got there, long before I was even born. Ultimately, it would continue to exist, and flourish, long after I was gone and someone else would be appointed to take my place. Hence, I decided that

all God was asking me to do was to do my very best according to my own human abilities and human limitations.

Due in large measure to the little prayer, I decided I would try to give control over many of life's daily struggles to God. When it came to my work and ministry, I decided I would trust my colleagues and seminary students to do their jobs. I would support and encourage them, and then stay out of their way, unless they needed me. I decided, then and there, that God would provide, if I was first willing to place my trust in God. When the time came for the Board of Trustees of the Seminary to conduct a review of my job performance, fortunately, I was given a positive review. But, as I look back on that experience, I never would have been able to succeed were it not for the words of the little prayer, "The supreme good is like water...it nourishes all things without trying to..."

THE ROPE THAT BINDS

In our lives, giving control of most of our daily struggles over to God is not something that comes naturally. Often our basic human instinct is to want to exert control over even the smallest things in daily life. From the brand of toothpaste I will use in the mornings to the kind of breakfast cereal I will eat before leaving for work, to the style of clothing I will wear, to the kind of pillow I will lay my head upon at bedtime, every fiber of my being seems to long for the capacity to control and govern my basic human needs. And yet, the words of Jesus to Peter, "someday they will tie a belt around your waist and lead you where you do not want to go" are words also spoken to you and to me, and to every believer who seeks to hear the voice of Jesus and put into practice his vision for living.

At first glance, the experience of being led to a place where we do not wish to go seems more appropriate for the elderly and invalid, who, spending the last years of their life in a nursing home, must be pushed in a wheelchair to go from room to room. They

are too weak to resist the cords of their years and the burden of their illnesses. Their lethargy makes it impossible for them to walk from place to place. Sometimes such nursing home residents are even tied in restraints, in order that they do not fall and break a hip. Sometimes, because they are so vulnerable, surveillance cameras are installed in their rooms to ensure that no one does them harm in their state of complete vulnerability. But the experience of being led where we do not wish to go does not apply solely to the physically vulnerable. The passage is not intended to apply to every human situation, nor is it meant to suggest that we should give up trying to control certain aspects of our daily lives. As a youth I quickly learned the old adage that came from the lips of many a teacher, coach, and elder that often reminded me that the Lord helps those who are willing to first help themselves.

Therefore, persons with a drinking problem, who wish to overcome the addiction, struggle to regain control over their impulse to drink too much. If they fail to do so, they, along with their family or loved ones, will suffer the negative consequences of alcoholism. Parents will work to instill a sense of discipline and respect in their child from an early age; otherwise they will lose control over the child's behavior. We have heard it said by sports authorities that the world's greatest athletes have a remarkable capacity to control their emotions and to govern their emotional range. Hence, it is said that the great golfer, Tiger Woods, is able to filter out many of the distractions on a golf course. This ability to govern his emotional range, joined with his enormous natural talent, separates Tiger from the rest of the pack. So, while there are certain things we can control and should control, at times every human being is faced with the task of discerning and judging when it is appropriate and healthy for us to control and govern certain aspects of our lives, and when someone, or something, will come along and tie a belt around our waist and take us to a place we do not want to go.

In his wonderful book, *The Holy Longing*, Ron Rolheiser employs a powerful metaphor to describe the experience of being led to a place we do not want to go. He calls this dimension of the Christian life the “rope of conscription.” For instance, when a young married couple begins to have children and raise a family, it is like a “rope” that is placed around them, compelling them to make choices and sacrifices no longer based on their own self-interest as a couple alone, but rather, based on what is in the best interest of their family and children. He describes in further detail the “rope of conscription” placed around the married couple in this way:

Instead of their normal agenda, they are conscriptively, asked to make a lot of sacrifices in terms of lifestyle, career, hobbies, meals out, vacations, travel, and so on. Their children stand before them daily, like Jesus before Peter, asking: “Do you love me?” If the parents say “yes,” then, biblically speaking, the children reply: “Up until now, you have girded your belts and walked wherever you wanted to, but now we are putting a rope around you and taking you where you rather not go, namely, out of your natural selfishness and into self-sacrificing maturity.”⁷

A DISTANT SHORE, A VOICE, AND A LOVELY FACE

To borrow for a moment Ron Rolheiser’s metaphor of the “conscriptive rope,” I’m reminded of a personal family example where such a “rope” or belt was tied around my collective family. This occurred when the time came for us to say goodbye to my dying mother. Over the course of sixty-one years of marriage, she and my father had raised thirteen children, who in turn had given them over sixty grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As the time of my mother’s death approached, our family began to realize that we had little control over the amount of suffering she would endure, much less when death would finally come.

For several months the cumulative effects of congestive heart failure, crippling rheumatoid arthritis, dementia, and glaucoma had converged to create a slow and painstaking journey toward death. For the last fourteen days of her time with us, she was a tiny eighty-five pounds, reduced to swallowing gulps of baby formula as her only form of nourishment. For hours and days at a time her children and grandchildren would take turns at her bedside at home, trying to provide as much comfort, care, and love as was humanly possible. For a time we prayed that she might be healed and restored to health, but then, in a way that can only be fully understood by someone who has had a similar experience of watching someone you love suffer, our prayer was transformed into a collective, “Your will, O God, not my will be done.” Just as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, just as Mary prayed, in fear and trembling, before the angel, just as Stan Rother prayed when the knock came after midnight in Santiago de Atitlan, now it was our turn to pray, to trust and to give control over to God.

A belt had been tied around us. A “conscriptive rope” was taking us where we did not want to go. Someone we loved deeply and unconditionally was slowly dying before our eyes, and we couldn’t do a single thing to change the outcome. In the end, all we could do was love. In retrospect, the only thing we had any control over was the depth of love we would offer my mother at her bedside. Whether it was softly singing her favorite lullaby, touching her parched lips with a moist cloth, nursing her bed sores, or just saying over and over again, “I love you, Mom,” all we could control was how we would continue to love her in her final days. In the end, a belt around us was pulling where we did not want to go. And we were being asked to trust that healing and rest would come for my mother, in a way, and in a place, that we could not see, much less, fully understand. The belt around our waist beckoned us, in a way that was gentle, yet firm, that it was time to trust and let go of someone we loved.

Over the years, I have often thought back to those days around my mother's bedside. What I did not realize at that particular moment, which I often think of now, was that another belt, one that we could not see, had also been placed around my mother's waist. Gently, yet firmly, the hand of God was tugging and pulling, taking Mom to another place, perhaps where she did not want to go. It's ironic to me, that often when I think of Mom, I picture her in our family kitchen. I see her smiling and cooking for us, as only she could do. And always I see her wearing one of her favorite aprons. For so many years she would tie the apron strings around herself as a beautiful sign of love and devotion to her family. But when the time would come for her to die, she would no longer be able to dress herself and go wherever she wanted.

I believe that the words of Jesus, once spoken to Peter at day-break on a distant shore, in a distant land, will be repeated many times over to us and to those we love throughout the course of our own lives. Like Peter, like Stan Rother, like my mother, many times we will hear these words, and we will be invited to stretch out our arms as a sign of our own trust, vulnerability, and confidence in God. Perhaps, we, too, will be invited to go to a place where we do not want to go. If at those particular moments, I am willing to trust beyond my fears, my apprehensions, my sorrows, and my doubts, I believe that I will catch a glimpse, if only for a moment, of what lies beyond the horizon. There, on another distant shore, I will hear again the voice of him who beckoned me, and then I will see with my own eyes the lovely face of God.