



LETTER XI

Force, Arcanum of Virginity

Spiritual Exercise: Perception and Reaction

The saying “Nature is fundamentally supernatural” is therefore profoundly true. For natural and supernatural life always originate from the same source. The source of all life is religion, conscious or unconscious, i.e. perception of the Presence and reaction to the Presence... the waters of the “sea of glass” before the throne ... are the calm, peace and stability of contemplation, or pure perception—they are “as glass”, “like crystal” ... the collective perception of virgin Nature (the “sea of glass” before the throne) is accompanied by the collective reaction to this perception (perpetual adoration by the four holy creatures)...” (page 271-2)



In his deeply wise book *An Ocean of Light*, Martin Laird suggests that the journey of contemplative practice invites us into an ever-blossoming transformation of consciousness. Most reasonably healthy and self-aware adults in our world have as our “default” awareness what Laird calls the “reactive mind” — this is the ordinary type of consciousness in which we tend to devote much of our cognition to *reacting* to whatever life hurls at us. We get distracted, we lose our temper, we jump to conclusions and get worried or frightened or anxious; we dream about hopes and possibilities, narrating for ourselves endless stories about what is completely out of

our control, but what we fondly (or desperately) hope will happen (this is what keeps casinos and lotteries in business). In short, we live our days in repeated acts of reaction to whatever stimuli seems to come our way — until the next stimulus comes along, and scurry off to react to whatever that is!

Engaging in contemplative practice helps us to see the knee-jerk patterns of reactivity, enough so that we can learn to interrupt the “tapes” and “triggers” and more consciously choose how we might respond to any given situation. This marks the blossoming of “receptive mind” as a deeper and more conscious way of interacting with life. We don’t immediately become so enlightened that we are never triggered ever again — but more and more, we learn to breathe some space in between the stimulus and our response, so that, little by little, we learn to be motivated less by our hidden patterns of reactivity, and more by our capacity to mindfully receive what is given to us, and then choose how we wish to respond.

For many people, the reactive mind becomes their mature, wise way of being in the world. But those who embrace a deep contemplative practice find that even another, more beautiful, blossoming of the self is possible. In the words of Martin Laird, “Seen in the light of the practice of contemplation, renewal of the mind is the manifestation of luminous mind, an ocean of light. When luminous mind swells with such ripeness that it breaks open, there emerges from it the very flower of awareness itself. The flower of awareness “perceives” only the grounding union of all creation in such a way that the particularity of every form of life—all creation—is distinct to the extent that we are all one in the breathing depths of God.” (*An Ocean of Light*, pp. 139-140).

In other words, the luminous mind is not so much a “higher” consciousness, but it represents that place where we discover what has been true: we are always bathed in the light of eternity, the light of divine love, *even when we are lost in the funhouse of reactivity or the relative calm of receptivity*. If reactivity means getting triggered by life and receptivity means learning to dodge the triggers, we bask in the luminous mind when we recognize that it all is one in God.

For the Arcanum of Force, our author reflects on how “virginal nature” represents the truth of who we are (*virginal* not in the sense of sexual renunciation, but in the sense of primal innocence). We are invited to meet this primal innocence with the capacity to perceive divine presence, and then to consciously react to that presence: not in the kind of unconscious reactivity that Laird describes, but in a fully awake, fully conscious capacity to respond to what is perceived with an appropriate gesture

of love and care. To the extent that we perceive the presence of God, we react with the gesture of adoration: of spontaneous worship and love.

The Exercise

Just as the “luminous mind” as described by Martin Laird is always present, even when we may be lost in the unconscious machinations of reactivity or the studied calm of receptivity — so too, the capacity to perceive the divine presence in the still, mirror-like waters of innocent nature is always within us, even if we are caught up in how easily distracted we can be in our fractured and fragmented world. The gift of contemplative silence and mindful stillness is the gift of inner attention that makes it possible to perceive what is always, already there.

The practice of this exercise is very simple. Imagine yourself present in a place of natural beauty or splendor that you find meaningful or where you sense you are “at home.” If you know of no place like this, then imagine what such a place must be like; whether real or imagined, visualize yourself in this meaningful/beautiful place.

Now, imagine that this place of natural wonder is a mirror — like calm waters, it mirrors without distortion the essential reality of the presence of God. In your mind’s eye/heart’s eye, perceive that the beauty of this place is a mirror, revealing for you the sublime splendor of the divine. Gaze into the face of God — the face of Love. Gaze into the ultimate beauty of divine felicity. Gaze into the infinite ocean of light and love what meets you with unconditional compassion and mercy and grace. Allow the mirror of nature to mirror, for you, the love of Love.

As you perceive this divine presence, notice what arises in you as a means of response (or reaction). Remember, this is not about “reactivity” in the sense Martin Laird uses the word, but about an essential, embodied response to the beauty you are perceiving. You may be awash with gratitude. You may feel a sense of wonder, or awe, or humility. You may feel immersed in the desire to worship and adore. There’s no need to force your response, but allow it to arise, and notice. Notice how you react to the perception of the divine presence.

This exercise can be done during your regular time of Centering Prayer or other silent practice, or — since it involves engaging your thoughts in a creative way, which is different from the normal directions for centering forms of prayer — you can perform this exercise either before or after your time for deeply silent prayer. Either approach is fine, do what is best for you. You can take as short or as long a time with this exercise as you’d like. There is not minimum or maximum. Just be present with the loving presence you perceive, and react/respond as you feel led to do.