

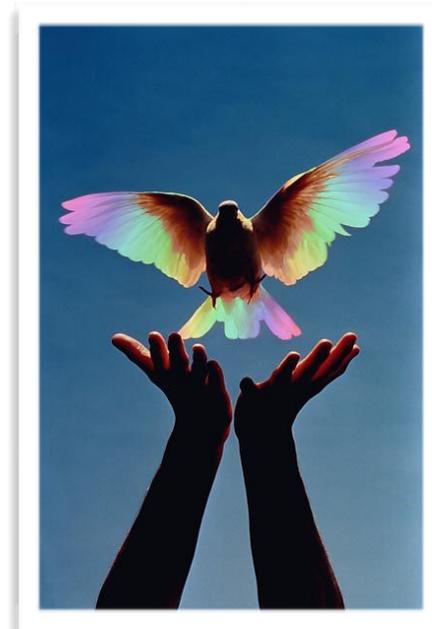
Things to Consider

- ▶ You might think that there is a real level of detachment in yourself and perhaps you are right. On the other hand, we are likely to find that as we 'let go' of the more obvious ways and things and don't grasp at them, so our attachments become more subtle and less obvious. John of the Cross said that it did not matter whether a bird was tied with a thin thread or a cord; it was still tied. And so it is with us and our attachments.
- ▶ The first step is simply to stop at times and try to take notice of what is happening in our life. Do you find yourself grasping for this or that, wanting or desiring more? When, for example, you are eating a meal, do you find yourself thinking about a 'second helping' or even the next meal before you have finished that one?
- ▶ As you eat that mouthful of food, do you pay attention to it, savouring its taste, noting its texture, or are you already getting ready for the next mouthful? It is about being present to this moment.
- ▶ Do you look enviously or even jealously at what others have in life or are able to do and for whatever reason you can't? Are you comfortable and 'at home' in your own skin? It is easy to forget that everyone has problems and difficulties, even if you do not see them. Everyone struggles.
- ▶ Notice the things that you find yourself arguing over in your head as to whether you are overly attached to them. Might it be saying something?
- ▶ Escaping across the Himalayas from Tibet in 1959, when so many perished during that march, someone was asked how they managed it. Their reply: 'One step at a time.' That too needs be our response as we struggle with detachment; this slowly letting go. It is the journey of a lifetime and as we go deeper, so we will discover more ways in which we are attached. Don't despair, just keep going. One step at a time.
- ▶ A danger is that as we begin to make a little progress, or even take larger steps, we start to notice other people and their attachments and find that we are being judgemental and feeling superior to them. We need to recognise this is a recipe for disaster. This is what the Pharisee was doing by comparing himself to the tax collector in that parable of Jesus (Luke 18.9-14). Humility and a good dose of realism is called for – in our own way we are no better than they and God loves us both, equally and as deeply.

AtG/B23/MBH

Attending to God

'God's Energy in Us' Letting go ... (Part 2)



In Part One we looked at God's energy in us (*Eros*) and how this is life-giving and needs to be channelled wisely and responsibly. I also said that beside this sits a 'letting go' (*Thanatos*) through all of life, but particularly from midlife onwards. In spirituality this has been given the name 'detachment' and it is this that I want to address here.

We live in an age of consumerism where a person's worth is judged by what they possess. (Yet Jesus Himself said that someone's worth as a person does not consist in the abundance of their possessions. [Luke 12.15]) Television advertisements tell us what we need to have in the way of possessions in order to be truly happy. In times of recession governments will tell us to spend so that we might 'come out' of the recession. After a while we begin to believe it all and we need to have the latest and best. In our search for that elusive happiness we believe that if only we can have this, or when we get that, then we will be truly happy. Of course we never are, but by that time our attention has moved on to the next new thing we need so that we can be truly happy!

Two soundbites from television advertisements capture this succinctly: 'You deserve it' whatever this experience on offer might be. This begs the question: 'Why?' The second speaks of our grasping Society: 'Grab a bite to eat'. How does such an action speak of being truly present in the moment with a thankful and grateful heart flowing towards God?

All of this needing to possess is tied to our needing to be in control. Somehow we feel that if we possess 'it' then we will gain more pleasure from it. In fact what happens is we find we are possessed by that object. The new car now has to be cleaned more frequently; we worry about paint chips and the possibility of theft. I was told that on Manhattan Island, New York, people who owned a car did not want to use them for fear of losing their parking space in the street!

Detachment reminds us of attachment. Attachment is a normal and healthy phase of life in our early years as we make our way in the world and this speaks of God's energy being released in us. Youth embraces life with vigour and must do. It reminds me of one of my lecturers in years gone by saying, 'We need to have an ego in order to die to ego, to let it go. Any ego will do; as long as you have one. Then you have something to work with.' So attachment is not bad, but wisdom and discernment are called for.

Hopefully, at some point, we begin to notice what we are doing and how we have become possessed by our attachments. One saying describes our attachments as like drinking salt water. We think it will cure our thirst, but instead it drives us mad with thirst. We do need to become aware of our attachments – whether they be material possessions, position in life, friends, ideas, and so on. It is not that these things are bad in themselves; it is just that we are possessive and in turn are possessed by them so that they control us. If we are trying to climb the 'ladder of success' then we find we are giving at least some of our power to others allowing them to control us in some way. Equally, as the historian Barbara Tuchman in *The March of Folly* reminds us, the more power we have over others, the less power we have over ourselves.

Joseph Goldstein says we need to recognise that the most powerful objects of attachment are sensory desires; things such as pleasant sights and sounds,

pleasant sensations in the body and stimulating ideas. Why? Because through our senses we relate to the world. There is nothing wrong with these things as they are God-given. The problem starts when we begin to be possessive, when we start to cling to them and become addicted. We can become attached even to our thoughts and opinions.

Now, despite the young person embracing life, even for them detachment is real, important and necessary. Think of the need to leave childhood behind, or our teenage years. The richness of marriage is balanced by the reality that we need to learn to die to self for there is now another and children whose needs often have to be met before one's own. But it is in the middle years and beyond that detachment begins to take on a sense of psychological and spiritual urgency.

David Steindl-Rast says that what is needed is 'an affectionate detachment. A letting go, gently. Not a throwing away. Never are things as splendid as at the moment when we lovingly give them up'. He also makes the important observation that thoughtlessness takes things for granted, whereas mindfulness is grateful, which makes for happiness, for we are mindful that everything is gift and this inspires thankfulness.

None of this should be seen in a negative light for we are being invited to something deeper. As we have to let go of cherished hopes and dreams, our younger years, and even health and energy, we are being invited to grow inwardly. It can be seen as a movement from complexity to simplicity. We are being invited to enter a new, vast country where we have much to learn. It can be exciting, but we can, refuse this invitation and many do.

It is not so much a stripping of possessions, though for all this will have some part to play as we live in a consumer society and most have been drawn in to some extent. But rather it is a stripping from self of our selfishness and self-centredness. We can even become subtly attached to spiritual things, a kind of 'spiritual materialism', as one writer puts it, and try to possess God, making Him just another object. In truth we can be possessed by God, but not possess Him.

Detachment's aim is to help us put first things first. We have allowed our self to be dominated by our possessions and controlled by our desires and these end up ruling us rather than us them. It is a case of the tail wagging the dog.

Our aim is to discipline the body and bring it under control, not to destroy it, nor hold it in contempt. To do this would be dualistic. Christianity is an incarnational religion with God in Jesus Christ becoming human and redeeming us. We are a part of God's creation and this creation reflects the glory of God. And so detachment is never an end in itself, but rather a means to becoming all that God wants us to be. As Irenaeus said, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive'.

Belden Lane uses the illustration of catching brown trout in river-fishing and then releasing them back into the waters of the river. He speaks of our spiritual journey as being this 'catch and release' experience: delighting in life splendours but choosing not to possess.

Jesus said that we are to become perfect as God is perfect (Matthew 5.48), that is to become whole. He also said that where our treasure is there will our heart be for we cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6.24). Detachment's aim is to remind us where our real treasure lies, so that we might become 'perfect' or whole.