

Acorn

Growing toward our full stature as
members of the Body of Christ



By Stephen M. Gira, C.R.

Dedication:

To Patti Webb who, after reading one of my short essays said,
"I want more!"

*Is it not incredible, that in the acorn
something has hidden an entire tree?*

Mary Oliver
"More Evidence"
From *Swan*

Introduction

Acorn: surely an unusual name for a book not about oak trees, botany or anything else biological by an author who knows little to nothing about any of them. However, we all are acquainted with acorns. We have seen them lying on the ground, perhaps even taken one of them home. We know that the acorn is the seed which contains everything the oak tree will need to grow to full stature. But it will be a slow process and much patience will be required, as well as assistance from others along the way. There will be painful moments too. Sometimes the acorn must be scared first, or even pass through the bowels of animal before it is truly prepared for the work that lies ahead.

In this book the acorn will serve as a metaphor for you and me on our spiritual journey of growth. From the very beginning God gives us our own personal acorn that contains everything we will need to grow into our true selves, to grow toward full stature as a member of Christ's own Body. The potential is all there. We need not go about begging God for more: more skills, more talents, and more abilities. We have what we need by God's gift to us.

We each have a spiritual acorn deep within. We will need help to discover it, patience to see its slow growth, and perseverance to keep on working at it for a lifetime.

However, it seems that many of us cut off the journey, casting aside our acorn at one point or another for various reasons:

- Maybe you really thought that with graduation from eighth grade, or after celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation, you

- Perhaps religion was a boring or embarrassing topic for you; definitely not “cool”. You could have had teachers that did not present things in an engaging and interesting manner;
- Or there could have been a priest who embarrassed you by reprimanding you in church or class, or as an altar server;
- Maybe when asking questions about your faith you were told that you did not need to know these things and so the questions about the Bible, the Sacraments or moral values remained hidden within you;
- Sometimes it could have been that the person you asked did not know the answer themselves and was embarrassed to admit it, so they just put you off;
- You could have simply gotten tired of hearing pleas for money from the pulpit;
- You could have been treaded rudely by any of the ministers of the parish, priest, director of religious education, teacher, principal or coach, and you said to yourself, “I’m never going back there again!”

The reasons can be many and as varied as each individual’s experience, but often they have to do with one thing: religion, that is, some aspect of the organized, institutional structure we all know as Church. All the rules and regulations can be confusing and discouraging at times. I often remember hearing Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, say in one of his taped talks: “Don’t let religion get in the way of your faith!” After all they are different and faith is what God wishes to give us if we but dig a little

deeper into our acorn and continue our formation as a person of faith. That growth in true wisdom cannot possibly have ended in eighth grade! Faith is too big a reality, full of too much mystery and divine love to ever say we are finished. Only the grave will finish that journey.

Imagine if your medical doctor or your computer tech were to think, "I don't need to learn anymore or update myself on newer trends of thought. I'll just keep doing things the way I learned in school years ago." Would you want to visit that doctor with your ailments? Would you call that computer tech the next time your hard drive crashes? The answer is obvious.

This book is all about deliberately NOT shutting down the difficult process of spiritual growth that if worked at, struggled with and persevered through dark and painful times will bring us closer and closer to our true self waiting to burst forth from our acorn, full stature as a member of the Body of Christ.

This book is about topics in the spiritual experience, topics we may only partially have explored. It is about pushing us a bit to a more adult vision of our faith. Sometimes we have not gone deeper into spiritual matters because we never had the opportunity, or were told by religious professionals that we need not worry about this or that because it did not belong to the realm of the lay person in the Church. (Ever been told NOT to read the Bible?). It's not that Catholics are all wrong about what they believe in most cases. However, there is always something more to learn or experience to make our faith life more complete. Don't we often say, "You learn something new everyday"? Well, should that not be true of the most important part of our human lives, our religious faith?

Take a quick look through the table of contents and review the topics that will be presented. Notice how the main sections unfold in a slow, gradual process, which for the oak tree, and for ourselves as well, will take a lifetime to reach its destined stature.

We all begin just with that small acorn. But soon, especially if we are fortunate enough to have visible faith examples around us in daily life, we will begin to break forth from that acorn, to grow, to learn about human life, to understand some fundamental truths about our experience on this earth. We will begin to encounter the divine presence. But we are just getting started; we are only yet saplings.

If we persevere in this hard work of wanting to discover our true identity, who God has made us to be, then we must not stop our search, even though it will be more difficult now that we are out of school, married, taking care of running the kids here and there all while working two jobs to make ends meet. Opportunities might be there before us in our own parish: Bible Study, Book discussion groups, Renew Groups and Small Faith communities, retreats like Christ Renews His Parish, Marriage Encounter weekends, Cursillo, and the list goes on. Yes, there are opportunities but we have to grasp them or they will pass us by. We may need to seek out a wise spiritual guide who might help us by recommending books and articles to read. And for those most adventurous there could be ongoing higher education in spiritual or pastoral theology at a local theological school. Through all these efforts we encounter more and more people on a similar search; we are becoming a tree, not alone in a clearing, but in a forest of other trees. This is, after all, the best definition of Church – a Forest; a community of persons growing day by day as disciples of the

Risen Jesus, working together to make a difference in the wide woodlands in which we have taken root.

And still the Season roll forward, and more experiences await the open heart, our God reaching out, touching us deep within drawing us ever closer to this divine presence within ourselves and each other.

I would make a suggestion on how to approach this book. I learned a phrase many years ago that is used in Easter Spirituality: "Beginner's Mind". Beginner's mind is an attitude toward all of life that basically says: "I can set aside what I think I know so that I can come to find that which I do not.." Come to these topics with no preconceived notions. Come only with a Beginner's Mind that wants to be taught because we realize there is so much we don't know. So if you can, cast aside that phrase, "But that's not what I learned in school!" Set it gently but firmly in the margins and have an open mind as if you were starting all over from the beginning. Who knows what treasures may await you along the way. Maybe you too will then say, "I want more!"

Stephen M. Gira, C.R.

July 11, 2010

Feast of St. Benedict

Chapter One: God as Metaphor

God. How can we speak of God whom no human being has ever seen face to face? What is God really like? What are God's attributes, God's thoughts and feelings? Can we even use such human words to speak of God at all?

Over the years we have made many claims about God's nature: God is All-Powerful; God is All-Knowing; God is Almighty; God is All-Loving and Forgiving. What is the basis for such claims? How do we know they are true?

Think back to the time when you were just a very young sapling. When we are small children things seem to be more clearly defined and more readily accepted into our view of the world. What we hear and learn from parents, teachers, religious or priests we tend to accept as true without too many questions. What are your childhood memories of God? Take just a moment of quiet to recall them or even write them down.

In conversation with others we will find areas of commonality, similarity of images; there will also be differences. Much of this depends upon our childhood experiences surrounding God, family, church (if you went to one) and among our peers. There will be both positive and negative images of God among us.

Some of us may have had a picture of God as an older man with a beard, the creator of all things. (And this is not something just for the child among us. Even great Christian art, itself struggling to represent God, has imaged God this way.) God is depicted as totally in charge of the universe; God sits upon His holy throne, scepter in hand; God is Almighty and can do anything God wishes to do. God will not let evil overcome the good. We may have thought of God as All-Merciful and Forgiving. These are strong, peaceful and comforting images for a young sapling.

On the other hand we may also have some fearful imagery for God, communicated to us through others or even through some forms of art displayed at home or in our churches. I recall clearly in one of the stained glass windows of my childhood church, a large triangle with a huge eye right in the center. The message came through clearly to me: God is always watching me. If I do something wrong I will surely be seen and caught in the act! Fear of God, in the negative sense, was a powerful tool to control my behavior and maybe yours as well.

It is like the rather humorous tale of the young Jewish family whose son was always misbehaving in class. So they switched him from the public school to the Jewish school. Despite this, his behavior continued as before. Finally the parents decided to send their son to the local Catholic school. Suddenly, for some unknown reason, his behavior changed for the better. The parents were delighted. At the first parent and teacher conference they asked their son's teacher what could possibly have made such a difference in so short a time. The teacher did not have an answer. When they got home that evening they asked their son what motivated him to correct his behavior so quickly. The son said, "Every day I see on the wall right above my teacher what they did to that Jewish man, and I decided I'd better shape up!" A cute and funny story for sure, but the point is, of course, that frightening images can be strong motivators. Parents and educators have not been loathe to use them, creating what has come to be known as good old "Catholic guilt".

So who or what is God? As we saplings continue to grow into small oaks we develop a more sophisticated vocabulary and more imaginative ways of speaking. "God is my rock," someone might proclaim boldly. Another might say quoting psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd". From Rock, Shepherd, King and Ruler, Policeman, Lawgiver, to the "man upstairs" all these names and phrases are showing us that we are never speaking directly about God; we are speaking in metaphors, images that express what cannot be expressed in any other

manner. Let's be clear: metaphors are not facts and should not be twisted into being made so. Metaphor is the world of language we use when we try to speak of any experience that cannot be plainly spoken, often an experience that is beyond us in some way.

I remember a husband and wife who were introducing themselves to a parish group. The husband described his wife as his "rock" because he leaned on her for strength; she was the foundation of his life and he could not imagine life without her. Right away the meaning of his phrase, "My wife is my rock," was clear to us; we understood what it meant.

What happens when we step back from that metaphor and say, "No, she is not a rock; she is a human being." This is not a metaphor; this is a fact. His wife is not made of stone. But in trying to describe the impact she has on his life, her husband could not just say, "This is my wife; she is a human being for me." He needed language that would go to a deeper truth. He needed a metaphor. But the very moment we try to make the metaphor a fact (she really is a rock) then we have destroyed the metaphor and its power to communicate more deeply than facts alone.

How can we express our feelings in a clear and understandable way about an experience that somehow takes us beyond ourselves? We turn to metaphor or poetry or music. The great composer of classical music, Felix Mendelssohn, is to have said, "Music is far more precise than words."

Therefore, every time we try to speak of God, we have no choice but to speak in the language of metaphors. Why? Because no one knows God directly. Even the mystics, classic spiritual writers of our tradition, who have the most direct experience of God in prayer that may be possible on earth, when asked to describe their experience fall right back into the language of metaphors. Some of these mystical authors, both men and women, used metaphors that were

deliberately contradictory to help us know that we could never understand even the most clearly felt experiences of God. And so they might say “God is bright darkness” or “God is the living flame of love”, or “God is Being itself.” How else could we express ourselves? How could we ever think we could define the One who is totally Other, totally beyond us?

Jesus too used all kinds of metaphors: The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed; like a wedding banquet; like a pearl of great price; a treasure buried in a field. His use of story and parable continue that trend. And when Jesus himself attempted to describe his experience of God, He called God “Abba, Father,” and he taught us to pray in exactly that metaphorical way in the Lord’s Prayer. But “God is my father” is still a metaphor, and while it may have great meaning and give comfort to us, some people have experienced the worst kind of treatment at the hand of their very own father, and so this metaphor might not be the most helpful in describing the goodness and love of God. Some might have to gently set this metaphor aside.

This may shock many of us. After all, didn’t Jesus, who knows God best of all, teach us that God is Our Father? Even Jesus had to deal with the limitations of human language to speak of the Divine. God is not literally a father. God is not a male being, who begets children. To try to make even this metaphor a fact distorts our God language and boxes us in to the view that God is “male” and only male. The prophet Isaiah used the feminine image of a mother to speak of God’s love for humanity: “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.”ⁱ And even Jesus himself used such feminine imagery when he stood on a hill overlooking his city, the city of Jerusalem and wished that he could gather all the people into one flock as a mother hen does with her chicks.

So what’s the point here? It is this: we need metaphors to speak of God. It is the only kind of language we have available. But we need to use them wisely and

know when we are speaking metaphorically and when we are speaking factually. The moment we mix the two we will have muddied the waters.

This becomes more evident as we branch out into more mature trees. Our world expands as do our questions and our searching. Sooner or later conflict arises between what we have learned through the metaphors taught to us earlier in life, and our present life experience.

For example, if we have in our minds the image of God as All-Powerful and Almighty then what happens to these metaphors when God does not intervene in a crucial situation according to *our definition* of All-Powerful or Almighty? If God is an All Loving Father, how could it happen that thousands of people are killed in a tsunami? How could it happen that other innocent people are dead or homeless because of a hurricane? How could six million Jews be murdered by the Nazis while God, the All-Powerful one stood aside and seemingly did nothing at all?

The author and political activist Dorothee Soelle, born in 1929 and witness to the atrocities of the holocaust, describes her reflection upon the death of the Jews as also the death of God:

I had left behind belief in an omnipotent father “who rules all things so gloriously”, derived from theism. For me, the metaphor of the “death of God” meant deliberately giving up the notion of the omnipotence of God as theologically and ethically impossible. In the light of Auschwitz the assumption of the omnipotent God seemed – and still seems! - to me to be a heresy, a misunderstanding of what God means. From this criticism of the theistic-patriarchal God I developed a position in which the cross of Christ stands in the center, as an affirmation of the nonviolent impotence of love in which God himself is no longer one who imposes suffering, but a fellow sufferer.ⁱⁱ

When we think we are right and just in a conflict or war, we expect God to be “on our side” and to give our military forces power to destroy our enemies. And what happens inside us when this does not occur, when the enemy wins the day? Where was God for us? We prayed, we petitioned God to help us in battle. How can this be explained, if at all? Once again Dorothee Soelle suggests an answer:

In fact we are not saved by any “higher being, God, emperor, or tribune,” as the Internationale put it. No higher being can save us, because the only salvation is to become love. More that this is not promised to us...Such hope for power, for the intervention of an omnipotent superiority and unassailability, has always deceived people. God is not the extension of our false wishes, nor the projection of our imperialisms.ⁱⁱⁱ

When natural disasters hit our planet some evangelical preachers are so bold as to suggest that God must be punishing those people for their sins! Writer Anne Lamott has said: “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do.”^{iv}

When we hear and use certain language we have an immediate underlying assumption: We know exactly what these words mean. All-powerful, for example, is the ability to do anything at any time. All-loving means God cannot NOT love in every situation. But the kind of power we are thinking of can come into conflict with an All-Loving God. Should God have used divine power and might to destroy the Nazis before they could have executed a single Jew? And if so, is such intervention the act of an all loving God?

Jesus taught us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. If this is true, then God cannot suddenly turn around and become the vindictive destroyer, interceding with force to stop the destructive energy of an imperfect natural world, or the sinful imperfections of violent human beings.

It is clear to us by now that since God does not intervene in this way we must conclude that somehow God's power is different than our expectations demand. God's power cannot be a force used to right the wrong. What does this mean and what would a picture of that kind of love look like? No image better conveys the reality that God's power is love than the lifting up of Jesus on the cross for the salvation of all. We are not naturally inclined to define power as love. Once again the prophet Isaiah reminds us: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts."^v

Our misunderstandings of God's ways become even clearer when we want to speak in detail about God. The more we grasp for words, the more trouble we will get into and we will end up saying things that are simply untenable and even silly. In his book, *Jesus Against Christianity*, Jack Pallmeyer describes such a circumstance.^{vi}

Imagine the scene at a terrible auto accident involving a number of people. Some are killed; others badly injured; and others walk away without a scratch on them. What words of comfort can be brought to each of these groups? To the families of those deceased, you might hear someone say, "Well, at least they are in a better place now. God must have wanted them to be with him in heaven." Regarding the badly injured, someone might say, "Maybe they just needed this kind of thing to help shake them up and put them back on the right track in life." And to those who walked away unscathed, "God was watching over you!"

Do you see the contradictions here? Was God not watching over the others who were killed or injured? Did God love those who escaped without injury more than the others? Did God love those more whom God brought home to heaven? Is God All-Loving or not? At this scene, it would depend on who you asked.

So what are we to do? Whatever image or images we have of God realize they are metaphors and not realities. This is why the 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “I pray God to rid me of God. The highest and loftiest thing one can let go of is to let go of God for God’s sake.”^{vii} He means that while metaphors may be helpful at times, ultimately they can never express the true nature of the God we seek. And if we insist that my metaphor is the only truth we will certainly be distorting God and almost certainly become hurtful and divisive to those whose views and experiences are different. Eckhart reminds us all: “God is nothing. No thing. God is nothingness; and yet God is something. God is neither this thing nor that thing that we can express. God is a being beyond all beings: God is a beingless being.”^{viii}

None of these thoughts are new at all. They have been written about and spoken of for centuries. Karen Armstrong in her book *The Case for God*, helps us to understand why this is so important:

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries that God does not exist and that there is “nothing” out there; in making these assertions, their aim was not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God’s transcendence. In our talkative and highly opinionated society, however, we seem to have lost sight of this important tradition that could solve many of our current religious problems.^{ix}

As we saplings grow into young oaks we are challenged to become mature enough to realize that we simply do not know and will never know or understand the great mystery that is God. In a way there is great comfort in coming to that realization. We can be at peace in the “not-knowing”. This too is part of our great tradition (often referred to as the Apophatic Tradition)^x: that in the end we are brought only to stillness and silence in the presence of the Divine. Like Elijah at the entrance of the cave,^{xi} all we can do is be still and listen for that tiny whispering sound that may tell us God is indeed very near.

Perhaps the best advice I have every heard comes from the pen of the Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton: “Your brightness is my darkness. I know nothing of You and, by myself, I cannot even imagine how to go about knowing you. If I imagine you, I am mistaken, if I understand you I am deluded. If I am conscious and certain I know you I am crazy. The darkness is enough.”^{xii}

As we continue to grow from sapling to oak, we mature enough to begin to realize that we don’t know more than we do know! And this is especially true when it comes to understanding the divine nature. The price of growing up is leaving behind our childhood securities and certainties, and choosing instead to live more in the kind of darkness and unknowing Merton speaks of. It has been said that the best respect we can offer to God is the gift of our silence.

ⁱ Isaiah 49:15, from the *New American Bible*.

ⁱⁱ Dorothee Soelle, in *Essential Writings*, Dianne Oliver ed., Orbis Books, New York, p.41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, Pantheon Books, New York, p.22.

^v Isaiah 55: 8-9, from the *New American Bible*.

^{vi} Jack Nelson Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity*, p.2.

^{vii} Matthew Fox, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, Bear and Company, Santa Fe, p.50.

^{viii} Ibid, p.41.

^{ix} Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, Knopf E Book, Kindle version, #184.

^x **Apophatic theology**—also known as *negative theology*—is a theology that attempts to describe God by negation, to speak of God only in absolutely certain terms and to avoid what may not be said. In Orthodox Christianity, Apophatic theology is based on the assumption that God’s essence is unknowable or ineffable and on the recognition of the inadequacy of human language to describe God.

^{xi} 1 Kings 19: 11-13.

^{xii} Thomas Merton, *Dialogues With Silence*, edited by Jonathan Montaldo, Harper Collins p.xiii.