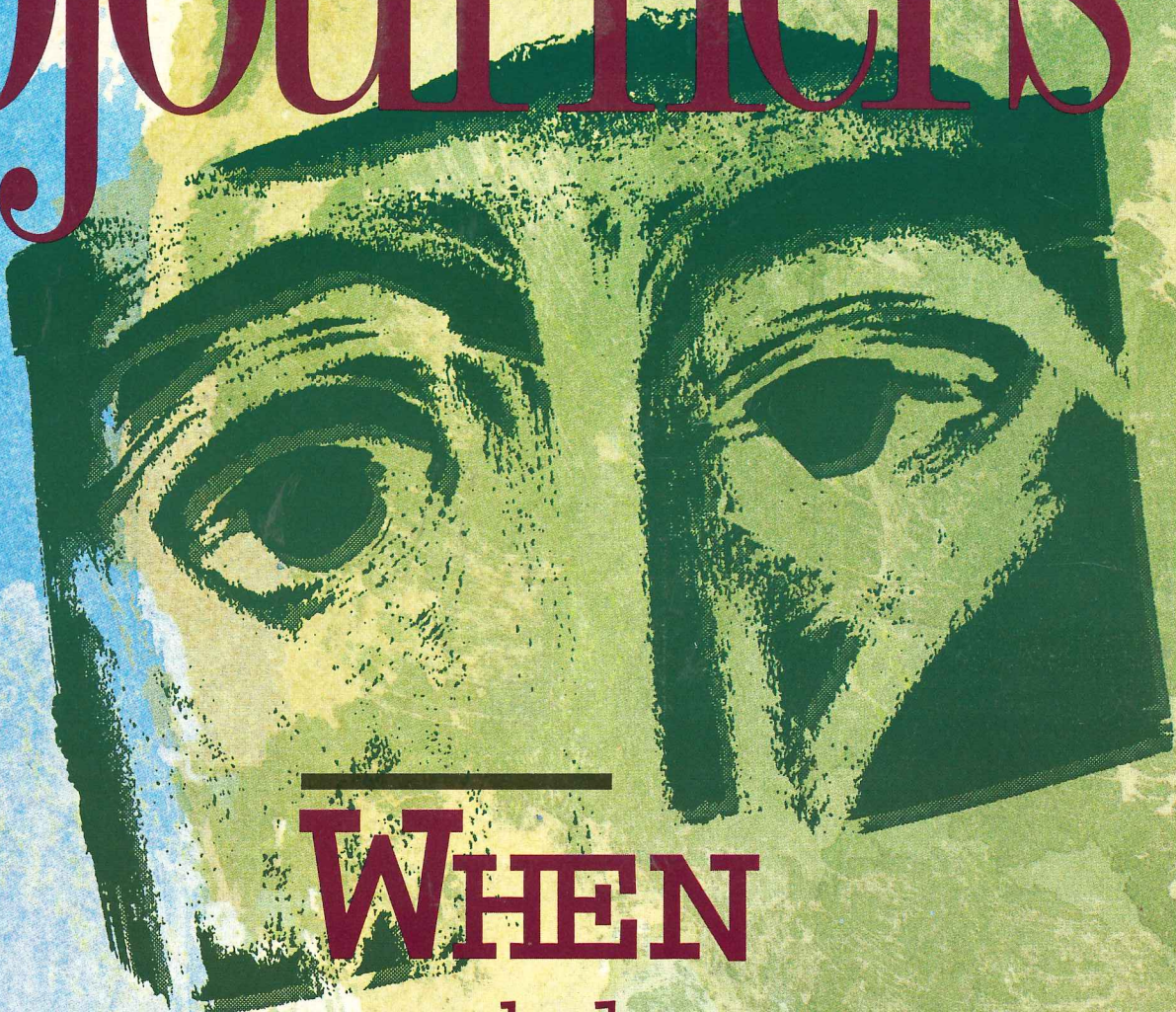


FAITH, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Sojourners

NOVEMBER 1991



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In growing psychologically, one moves toward increasing autonomy and independence. In growing spiritually, one increasingly realizes how utterly dependent one is, on God and on the grace of God that comes through other people.

—WILL AND SPIRIT
by Gerald May

■ IN THE 1950s AND '60s, THERE WAS AN EASY optimism afoot that touched the lives of most of us growing up then. It was likely naive, partial, and uncritical, but it surely made human relating a bit easier. Things were what they seemed. Objectivity reigned, except among strange

groups of bohemians and rarefied university professors, who talked only to one another. Things were clear and distinct, we all liked Ike, and you just needed a good education to know what truth was and a good church to know who God was.

WHY

You did not need to know too much about yourself or your parents. Your unconscious was comfortably unconscious. If you followed the laws you were good and probably felt so; if you broke the laws you were bad, and church and state would remind you to feel bad. Now we know that most of the "laws" were

DOES

products of the white, male system, but at least then we knew where we stood—and that offered a certain kind of real comfort to the psyche and to the society. I can see why the system has lasted through history.

PSYCHOLOGY

Let's call it the age of objectivity. Motivations, explanations, paren-

ALWAYS

tal addictions were not the issue: God, simple belief systems, culture, and rituals held our lives together.

The process of conversion from self-actualization to self-transcendence.

Then came subjectivity. A radi-

WIN?

BY RICHARD ROHR

cal new reference point, a new jargon, a new truth, and a new level on which to interpret all human behavior. The psychological age began, and by the late '60s became the language of the mainstream. It was a revolution just as profound and maybe more far-reaching than political revolutions or religious reformations. All of us are deeply affected by it; it is the air we breathe.

The Jungian psychologist James Hillman summarizes it well: "It's the prevailing opinion we encounter anywhere in the therapy world, the self-help world, the afternoon talk-show world. All make clear the importance of childhood, of coming out from disempowerment ('be in control'), recovering from past abuses, working through to self-acceptance ('I can be comfortable with that'), and the confessional witness of 'my own journey.' These advertisements for myself sound like the old Charles Atlas

ads: 'I was a ninety-seven-pound weakling, but look at me now.' "

Almost overnight the subjective self became objective truth. It was the unassailable "ground of being" which could not be questioned or left unaffirmed, at least in enlightened circles. Without knowing who the psychological "pope" was, one would sooner be caught theologically or politically incorrect than psychologically unaware or insensitive. The private self now had his or her character armor, and universities soon reported a dramatic drop in courses in philosophy, history, literature, foreign languages, and religious studies.

Our search for the permanent, the transpersonal, the civic, and the global was no longer much of a search. We had discovered personal existence, and questions of essence seemed boring.

The "software" of things became so interesting that we began to ignore or even deny the hardware. This, despite the fact that psychology had not itself become a hard science or stood the test of any time. And who cared? It was sort of fun. It always gave us something to talk about, ways to "help" one another,

and surely ways possibly to understand our irrational behavior.

Now it was acceptable to seek life and growth in a largely verbal, mental, or conversational way. The best thing that one could do is "work on oneself." Adele Getty, a psychologist herself, says that "rather than confront the social, political, and spiritual dilemma of the day, human growth has become a pacifier, the means to avoid the larger issues of human survival. Since society has 'no future' it makes sense to concentrate on one's own performance, and to practice transcendental self-importance."

We went inside to grow, and are still discussing whether the birth canal exit is wide enough or even necessary.

For some reason it is a mortal sin to repress any feelings, fears, or sexual fantasies, but it is totally acceptable to repress the objective issues of famine, destruction of habitat, medical care, and arms sales to everybody.

The psychological and the subjective are bottomless and fascinating. You do not need to have a degree to enter into the conversation. In fact, a past experience of crime, abuse, or

destructive behavior actually gives you authority. You

will soon be on Oprah! Psychological conversation provides both instant intimacy and a sense of control, which feel vital and sacred.

When psyche meets psyche there is usually insight, communion, expansion, or at least distraction. It feels alive and will always lead you to another level of revelation or confrontation. There is often no goal beyond the process itself or that elusive thing called healing, therapy, or recovery. But as Hillman also says, "Biography is an act of imagination; we tell the stories we need to tell to explain what we want to say now. Personal history is also fiction."

THIS SOUNDS A BIT hard perhaps, but the enduring philosophical traditions have never confused *existence* with *essence* as we do today. In fact, the great world religions call passing feelings, hurts, and images such things as illusion, temptation, trial, grace, opportunity, passion, or "shadow and disguise." They are means not ends, windows and doorways perhaps, scaffolding to be discarded, but surely not the temple itself. Not



the thing in itself.

At best, the search for understanding or sobriety or healing is seen as the early "purgative way," but not yet the classic "illuminative" or "unitive" paths. In these, we less and less need explanations, success, or control. The Mystery has shown itself. It's OK. It's enough. No one need be blamed, shamed, or worshiped, including the self. If that is not the freedom of the children of God, what would it possibly be?!

In true spirituality and healthy religion, we are always pointed back and through ever-changing psyche to never-changing Spirit. It is a tragedy of major proportions that so many clergy and ministers have lost trust in their own radical Center and radical answer. Among spiritual directees, I can often sense in the first 10 minutes whether a person has crossed the threshold into Spirit, is ready for it, or is still trapped in mere psyche. "Inner work" is a common substitute for the authentic search for God, precisely because it is so close and some of the effects are the same. The corruption of the best is the worst.

I think Gerald May, of the Shalem Institute in Washington, D.C., is presenting the boundaries and competence of religion and psychology better than anyone else on the American scene. He rightly says that it comes down to the slight but infinite difference between the words willfulness and willingness. Willfulness is the Western way of control, mastery, explanation. But, in May's words, "Willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering-into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process."

Willfulness is a matter of education. Willingness is a matter of conversion. They are both good, as long as they respect and defer to one another appropriately. In my experience, that is happening less and less in secular society. Psychologizing usually wins. And religion is handed over to soft piety, dogmatism, and fundamentalism.

Don't get me wrong. It is not one or the other. In classic theology grace *always* builds on nature. It is just that nature today seems to be afraid there is no grace at all.

I have always found an unsolvable paradox in the Genesis account of the Fall. Why did Yahweh tell Adam that he could "eat of all of the trees in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat, for on the day you eat of it you will most surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17)? Why would the great temptation and the great sin be doing something that appears to be necessary and healthy? "The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give" (Genesis 3:6). I think God is trying to reveal an obvious but not always obvious truth: Loving is not about knowing.

Remember that it was the religious literati who found their justification for the death of Jesus; later it showed itself as the heresies of Pelagianism and Gnosticism (we can do it by correct effort or correct knowledge!); the medieval church became masterful at casuistry and mystification of the clear teaching of Jesus; the Enlightenment told us, "I think, therefore I am"; and even the Reformation was much more over theology than praxis.

Now we seek salvation by interaction and theory—all understandable attempts to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. *Knowing* becomes an excuse, a delay, a salt substitute

for that surrender to Love, which is "always ready to excuse trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Let's admit that this freedom (the only freedom the gospel promises us) is almost lost in our time, even in the church. Everything must be managed, understood, explained, tallied through, worked out, confronted, and exposed (except so-called injustice). In such a private, heady, and protective world, Love has a hard time breaking through. We "understand all the mysteries there are, and know everything, and have faith in its fullness to move mountains, but [are too often] without love" (1 Corinthians 13:2).

But religion, spirituality, the search for God are *always* about love. The only knowing we hold onto is the non-need to know. Believers live comfortably in the "cloud of unknowing" or at least they once did. Mystery was OK.

I HAVE NO DESIRE TO be reductionist, anti-intellectual, naively shouting that "love conquers all." I would like to deal with the objective phenomena that most of our communities have died amid tons of expertise, far too many projects and programs crash on the rocks of hurt feelings, and the pressing issues that we all want to deal with usually flounder on in-hostile issues of ego, power, and personality conflicts.

I've heard that 80 percent of ministry today is personal and grievance work with staff. Is this what it might mean to be banished from the primal garden? Are these "the cherubs with flaming swords guarding the return to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24)? We have surely died by eating so voraciously from the tree. Many other parts of the human person—body, shared memory, the patience of space and time, the holy realm of mystery and symbol and myth—have all been repressed in favor of a knowing that really meant controlling.

Jesus found the way back to the garden, ironically by going into the desert. It is not by accident that this is the very first thing he performs after his baptism. There he cleans the lens, empties the false self, and faces directly the illusions of effectiveness, rightness, and control (the three temptations in Matthew's gospel), finally shouting at Satan, "You must worship the Lord your God, and serve God alone. And at that the devil left him" (Matthew 4:10-11).

I wonder if there is any less radical way to get back to essence. Probably not, because the next word out of Jesus' mouth is "Repent!" He mandated the absolute pivot from an anthropocentric worldview to a theocentric one. Without the desert, religion is largely the maintenance of self-image, and psychology is its newest toy.

WHAT IT'S ABOUT IS WHAT IT'S ABOUT

■ When the psychological mind dominates, there is no such thing as "face value" anymore. In fact, you are considered naïve or unaware if you take other people at face value. All of our words, actions, and decisions can be expected to be analyzed, judged, and pigeonholed by ourselves and others.

Behavior cannot ever speak for itself and stand on its own merits or demerits. There are always dark and devious motives underneath. No wonder most modern people live with "negative self-image"!

This analysis is, of course, partially true, but once

becomes the primary lens, the "seeing" is endless, the experts are many, and none of it is verifiable. It is a moving target and a movable feast that undercuts all trust and promise between human beings—a far cry from Jesus' teaching to "say 'yes' if you mean yes, and 'no' if you mean no" (Matthew 5:37).

Perhaps the popularity and effectiveness of the 12-Step Program is that it makes use of this brutal, behavioral honesty. Own it, name it, confess it, stop it! The therapeutic society is almost embarrassed by the simplicity and lack of rationalization. But what it's about is what it's about.

THE LANGUAGE OF ROMANTIC EXPRESSIONISM

■ The first and unquestioned language of American life is the language of individualism. Alexis de Tocqueville began speaking of this in his early study *Democracy in America*: "Such folks owe no [one] anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands."

In the psychological age, this first language has taken a new twist. Philosopher William Sullivan calls it the language of romantic expressionism. It is a private language of concern, sensitivity, and individual rights. No one in polite company can disagree with it without appearing to be a complete boor. It is warm, affectionate, and infinitely respectful of each person's feelings, hurts, and needs. To be PI (politically incorrect) in this area is to incur the wrath of otherwise tolerant liberals and broad-minded believers. Individual rights are the ultimate virtue; individual responsibility is seldom spoken of, lest "guilt" be incurred.

Romantic expressionism's power should not be underestimated. It recently served to validate for most Americans the killing of 150,000 Iraqis—no one could possibly disagree with "support our troops!" In one clever sleight of hand, the language was changed so that the objective immorality of the war could not be addressed. Even intelligent critics had to preface their remarks with the absolute assurance that they supported the poor

soldier who had signed up in the Marine Corps.

Will we ever be able to disagree with the military exploits of this government again? The esperanto of the American people has been found: romantic individualism. It subverts many other honest conversations by such phrases as "You must be true to yourself," "Listen to your feelings," and "I have a right to...." No one can counter such comments, even though there is little philosophical ground for such assertions. Prepare yourself for a future of endless competing rights and bottomless competing feelings.

COMMUNITY AS "TALKING IT OUT"

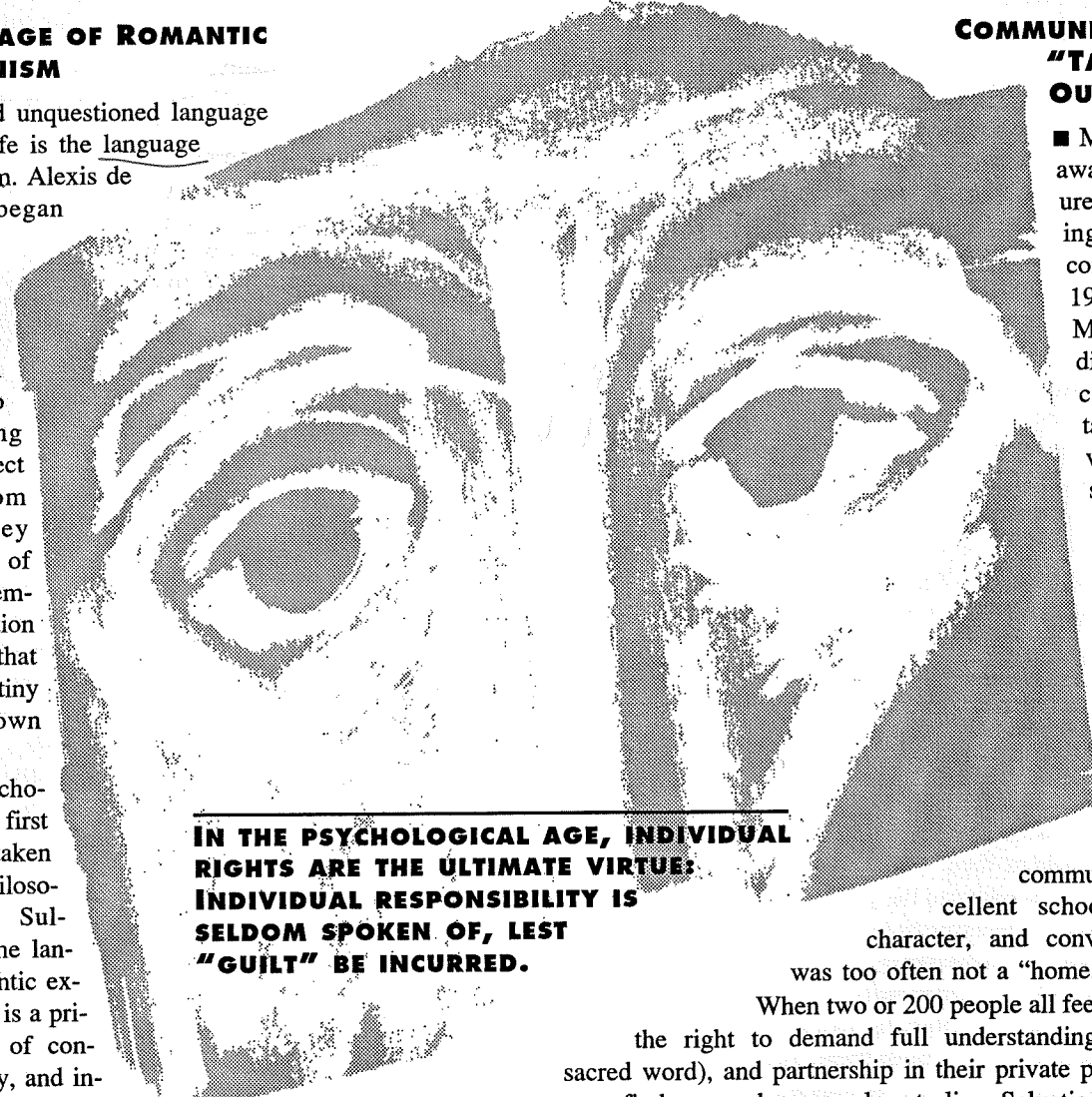
■ Many of us are aware of the failure of our exciting attempts at community in the 1970s and '80s. Many of them died, I fear, because they talked, met, and worried themselves to death. After years of in-house and seemingly cyclical conversations, many movers and shakers decided to move on. Usually they later admit that

community was an excellent school of growth, character, and conversion. But it was too often not a "home."

When two or 200 people all feel that they have the right to demand full understanding, support (the sacred word), and partnership in their private pain, most folks soon find a more humane place to live. Salvation by interaction expects and often demands from other people what the objective tradition said only God could give.

"Save me" says the newcomer to community. Give me a secure and happy home here on Earth, be my mother and father in a nurturing (but not a restrictive) way. Yet we all know that you can only marry one person at a time, you cannot meet even most of his or her needs, and in the end you are still profound mystery to one another. I wonder if the great mystery of forgiveness is even possible without an acceptance of radical Mystery. I doubt it.

I see now why the Rule of St. Benedict and the Rule of St. Francis have stood the test of time. The boundaries are clear and the wheel does not need to be re-invented with each new personality that jumps in the buggy. Historic Christian commu-



IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AGE, INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS ARE THE ULTIMATE VIRTUE: INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IS SELDOM SPOKEN OF, LEST "GUILT" BE INCURRED.

9. May: Deep & Divine
nity does not depend upon charisma, articulateness, or even understanding. The novice's "needs" were left unmet, until s/he discovered what s/he really desired. The community hoped it would be God, not human sympathy.

Claude Levi-Strauss says that myth in each culture teaches "the appropriate distance between things." We have no myths except modern romances. Such false and impossible intimacy will continue to make community in America very difficult, and sometimes even counterproductive. The thousands of disillusioned and alienated ex-community members are a judgment not only on the limitations of their communities but also on their own narcissistic expectations. Community cannot at once be re-parenting, adult education, home away from home, therapeutic society, and support group for my private agenda.

VICTIMHOOD AS THE "HIGH MORAL GROUND"

■ The psychological age has found a surprising and rather ingenious method of gaining power: Play the victim. Given the language of romantic expressionism, no one can criticize you without appearing to be crass and politically incorrect. It's the ultimate and impregnable position. Every talk show is about people who are "outraged" and "offended" by some other group, whether it be a city council calling for year-round schooling or flag worshipers who want their totem protected and enthroned.

The talk show hosts become the public arbiters of victimhood. Oprah and Geraldo hear both sides, insults and injustices are dragged out, and the crowd decides who is the greater victim. Because there is no objective reference point, Madonna can end up looking like an abused, misunderstood innocent, and fathers who don't offer child support are seen as manipulated by their greedy wives.

To hurt, to suffer, to deserve sympathy is to have achieved moral victory. Once you can prove that you are indeed a victim, no more can be demanded of you than the perpetual right to tell your story. The rest of us should feel the appropriate guilt and offer propitiatory incense.

We all know that there are real victims, and the role of the prophet is to proclaim their story publicly. But sophisticated, psychological society has used the profound Christian archetype of the Lamb to gain negative power for people who are often merely bitter with their own vendetta. The victimhood of Jesus is accepting, forgiving, and non-self-serving. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world; the victim lambs insist that the rest of the world has sinned against them. The first redeems. The second deadens and paralyzes.

This is an important distinction because the language and vocabulary of the victims is usually the same language used by radicals, activists, and those of a faith perspective. Minority leaders have told me they sometimes resent liberals even more than conservatives because liberals unwittingly encourage them to identify with their victimhood. "By the fruits you will know."

A DISTASTE FOR CONTEMPLATION

■ Contemplation is just a way to describe what Jesus did in the desert. It's not learning as much as it is unlearning. It's not explaining as much as containing and receiving everything, and holding onto nothing. It's refusing to judge too quickly and refining quietly in observation and awareness.

You cannot understand things once you have approved or

disapproved. There is too much you there! Contemplation is loosening our attachment to ourselves so that Reality can get at us, especially the Absolute Reality that we call God. William McNamara rightly calls contemplation "a long loving look at the Real." Aldous Huxley calls it "the perennial philosophy."

Contemplation is the most radical form of self-abandonment that I can imagine. It is most difficult if there is not profound trust that there is Someone to whom I can be abandoned. Such self-forgetfulness, paradoxically, leads one to a firm and somewhat fearless sense of responsibility. Now I can risk responsibility precisely because I know the buck does not stop here. There is a co-creation going on, a synergism between surrender and personal responsibility, God "co-operating with those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

As such, contemplation is most difficult and even unnatural in an overstimulated world of images and attachments to them. It is next to impossible as long as we identify with our passing feelings and opinions. For that very reason we have made it the *sine qua non* of our "school for prophets" here in Albuquerque. No new perception, no new engagement, no honest name for God will emerge in our cluttered time apart from a contemplative stance which relativizes mere psychological data.

"TO BE IS TO DO"

■ If we look at the great mythologies, quests, and myths of religious and secular history, we see that events, historical trials and concrete circumstances are themselves the primary teachers. For the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God is specifically encountered in history and relationships, and not in analysis. Community and commitments, and the trials thereof, grow people up. Heroism had to do with character, but character that showed itself in action and deed. Instead we have substituted personality for character, being for doing. *or really*

We are the first civilization, I am told, that substituted celebrities for true heroes and heroines. It is hard to think of a true hero that is idealized in our culture today. Now it is enough to be well-known for the sake of being well-known. The 100 most admired Americans each year are typically those who have been most in the news. Amazing—but surely also disastrous for the education of the next generation.

Being *without* doing becomes mere image and the management of image. The talk show, the self-help book, psychobabble—these are now allowed to replace direct learning, responsible action, and civic virtue. Being *with* doing teaches us that life is hard, we don't and shouldn't always get our own way, and success has many surprising faces.

Perhaps the hardest way to hear this is that a life of interiority and discussion is a rich person's luxury. Considering the state of humanity and the planet, this is not the time to "create your own reality." This New Age shibboleth is symptomatic of a pattern of fear and denial that likely recognizes the decline of the American Empire, but has no alternative in which to believe. And believers are still hesitant to live the public reality: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Corinthians 4:20).

Work, religion, and citizenship were the classic entranceways into the public life of doing. It is these three that have been co-opted by the private and psychological mind. Work is no longer vocation, but a minimal occupation to put bread on the table. Religion in middle-class society thrives on therapeutic and trendy jingoism. And citizenship has shattered into small special-interest groups, if it exists at all.

Where is the person who will model for us the beauty of political holiness? Where are the contemplative activists? I will race to their doorways.

LACK OF A COMMON/COSMIC NARRATIVE

■ The psychological mind assumes that a society can hold together without any "story" that is commonly held to be true.

All we need to do is pursue the freedom and self-actualization of each member. The modern liberal type believes that this is sufficient to give a people meaning and coherence.

I am convinced that much, if not most, of the modern neurosis is a direct result of a lack of a common, shared story under which our individual stories are written. As a result, our tiny lives lack a transcendent referent, a larger significance, a universal and shared meaning. Our common life is a "dis-aster," literally disconnected to the cosmic "stars." We are lost in insignificance.

In the centuries of fighting over the humanity and the divinity of Christ, the Western church has gradually lost touch with the larger and more universal message: "The image of the unseen God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth...through him and for him....and he holds all things in unity....because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him" (Colossians 1:15-20).

This is not a problem-solving Christ, not a denominational or cultural Christ, not a Christ domesticated by the churches, but the One who names in his life and person what *matters*, what *lasts*, and finally what *is*. He holds it all together in significance, reveals the redemptive pattern that we call the life and death of

things, and holds the meaning and value of our lives *outside of ourselves!*

Because we no longer "worship" such a Christ, we are condemned to worship smaller gods, and to build our lives around smaller stories. We try to replace him with colorized myths of pilgrims, George Washington, and Norman Schwarzkopf, but none of them are big enough or real enough to give universal order and meaning. We look to the private psyche but it is just not big enough or connected enough to encompass human spiritual longing.

The Christian church's efforts at evangelization will remain

trapped in culture and fundamentalism until we are ourselves large enough to proclaim a Cosmic

Christ. I am sure the psychological age is insufficient to the task. As James Hillman has said of his own profession, "Psychological counseling literalizes problems, and by killing the possibility of seeing through to their madness, kills the spirit."

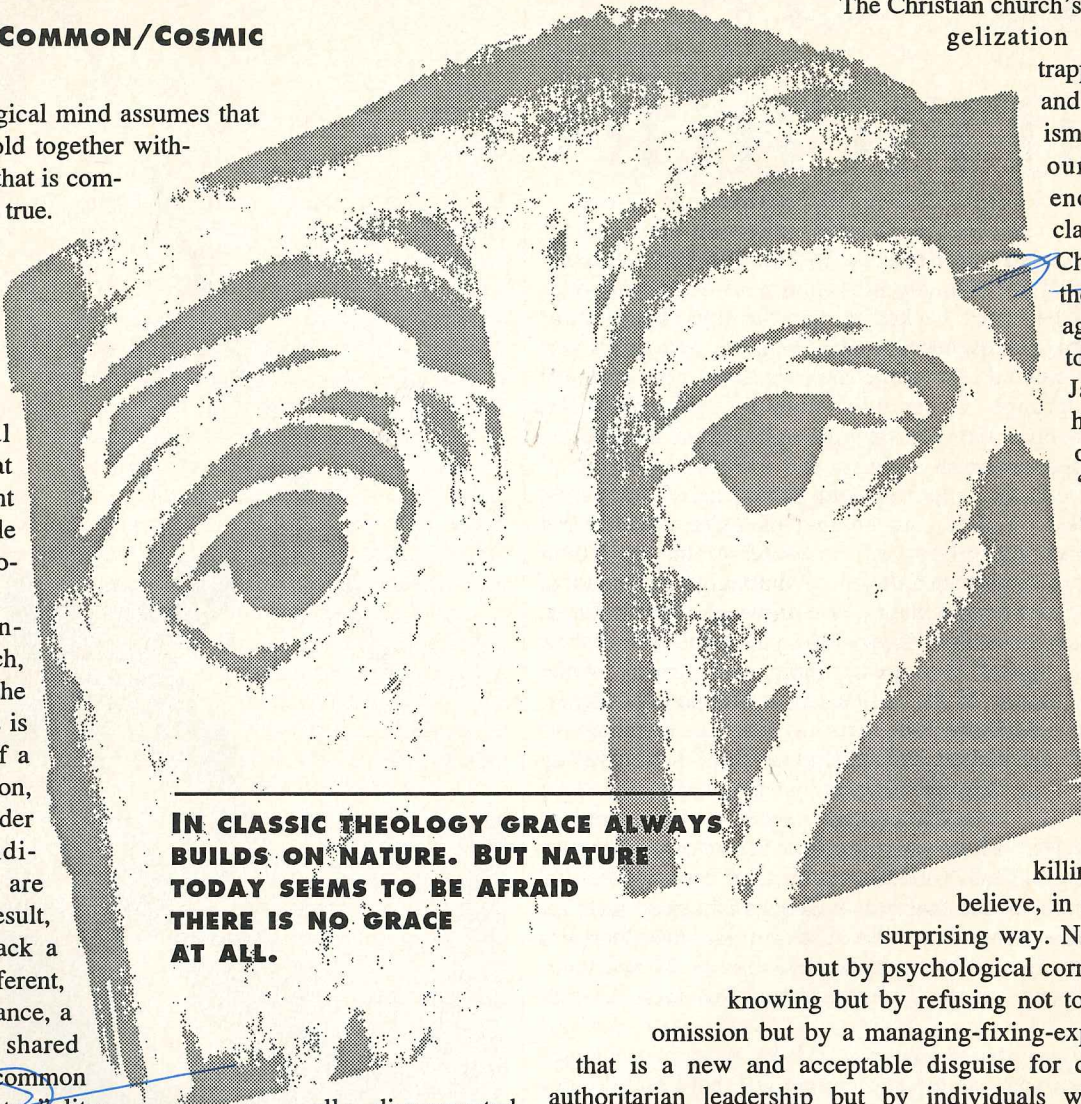
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killing the Spirit, I believe, in a new and still surprising way. Not by legalism,

but by psychological correctness, not by knowing but by refusing not to know, not by omission but by a managing-fixing-explaining of life that is a new and acceptable disguise for control, not by authoritarian leadership but by individuals who respect no authority except their private experience. This diminution of life calls into question almost all of the religious and spiritual traditions of the world religions. Further, it limits enlightenment to those who are educated, articulate, leisure class, and well-funded.

I claim the longer Tradition. I trust older guides, without rejecting the new. I remember the quote of the monk Thomas Merton: "Faith, patience, and obedience are the only guides that help us advance quietly in darkness without looking at ourselves."

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IN CLASSIC THEOLOGY GRACE ALWAYS BUILDS ON NATURE. BUT NATURE TODAY SEEMS TO BE AFRAID THERE IS NO GRACE AT ALL.