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Climbing Trees (Fr. John Garvey)

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Springfield, Illinois, across the street from open spaces, an active farm with cattle and corn growing in a field that adjoined the pasture. Beyond the farm was a forest, and another forest lay a few houses away from the north side of our house. After a few years the farm died but the fields remained, and the fields and forests were great places to explore and play in. I loved one tree in particular; its branches grew in a way that made it perfect for climbing. When I was nine or ten I would climb it nearly to the top, which was as high as the roofline of our house, and when storms were coming and the wind picked up, I liked getting as close to the top as I could, holding on when the tree began lashing back and forth. I was able to get away with this because my parents had lots of other, younger kids to herd and were often distracted.

Though I didn't really appreciate it at the time, the tree was my introduction to philosophy and a sense of deep mystery, of something sacred. I loved reading about science and had recently learned that we can only see part of the full spectrum of light. Looking at the tree one day I realized that I really couldn't see all of it; there were colors poured out there that were beyond my vision. Then I realized that I could see the tree from only one angle, that of a small boy. If I moved a few feet the branches took on a different configuration. If I were a giant, seeing it from above, it would seem very different. (It was easy to imagine this because one of the ways I found it tolerable to eat broccoli was to pretend I was a giant eating trees.) If I saw it from the perspective of a grasshopper it would be unimaginably vast. I slowly came to understand that I could see the tree from only one point of view at a time, always in a limited way.

Still, what was the tree apart from my ways of seeing it? It plainly was something that would in some ways always be beyond me, mysterious, largely unknowable-no matter how many things I could know about it. Only God could really know the tree as it was; only God could know the final thatness of the tree. Years later I found the same sense of the deep silence and mystery of things in Rilke's poetry, with its sense that this silence speaks to us, and must, and that something human dies when we fail to listen.

I have been very aware of this in recent months, because after years in a busy parish ministry I am now attached to a church where the pastor does virtually all the work, and I have a lot of time to write and read and be alone. I do occasionally have to fill in for the pastor, or substitute for priests in other parishes, but for the most part my days are filled with solitude. I have found that I like and even need this; and I know it's a rare luxury. In a way, it is a return for me to the day when I first saw the tree as full of mystery.

To a certain extent it is also a necessity, for at least some of our day, to spend time alone and in silence. A certain amount of silence and solitude is necessary for any appreciation of the sacred. There are times in life when this is nearly impossible...for example, when you are a young parent. My fear, though, is not that some people find this impossible; the problem is rather that most of us flee from it. I know that even when I am alone, I like music in the background, or the sound of the radio. I have to force myself to turn it off and simply sit down. But it is only when we go against the grain and force ourselves to do this that we begin to see the usual noise our minds make, that we begin to let that clatter settle down and to sense the real world around us. This is necessary for any serious prayer or meditation. Otherwise the words of prayer are not listened to in any depth, and the silence that is necessary as the place into which the words are spoken will not be real for us.

It is less and less possible to do this. No, it is almost always possible to do this, but we live in an age when the temptations not to experience solitude in any way are all around us. I often get up very early, and I am amazed when I look outside our apartment and see someone walking down the street at 5:30 in the morning with a cell phone to the side of his head, talking away. The sight of all those people chattering on cell phones all the time is the clearest recent sign of how terrified we are to be alone.

Once I was away from television for a few years; then I was sent to a convention, turned on the television set in the hotel room, and was astounded at the visual racket. It didn't take long to get acclimated all over again, but the time I had spent away from that particular form of distraction made me aware of how noisy, lurid, and even violent its effects can be.

The problem is not only that it is good for us to live with a sense of mystery and the sacred, or that we are deprived of something good when we do not. The effects of this constant noise and distraction are deeper and even more ominous. It is not as if the sacred were a luxury we can turn to if we are so inclined, an optional good thing. Rather, a sense of the sacred is necessary if we are to become truly human, and we are twisted away from what we are meant to be when we ignore the sacred. Although too much emphasis can be put on felt experience, where prayer and the Christian life are concerned, we must have an experience of the sacred to really be able to believe in it, and it can't be experienced without the kind of prayer that can be born only in silence.

Fr. John Garvey

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