

A Heart on Fire

Living as a mystic in today's world

Annika Spalde

Translated by Susan Beard



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Foreword

I have been a Christian ever since I discovered God at a confirmation camp in the summer of 1983 and I have been engaged in global issues ever since I witnessed the poverty in Latin America in 1986. Through the years my faith and commitment have inspired each other in my everyday life and in many different circumstances, such as campaigning against nuclear weapons and the arms trade in the European peace movement, working and living with the homeless while staying in Christian communities in Sweden and the United States, and as a deacon in the suburbs of Gothenburg in Sweden, where I have become involved in religious dialogue. I have often experienced it as a constant stream, an outpouring I consciously seek; a Something – a Someone – steering me towards an ever greater reverence for life. *A Heart on Fire* is my attempt to describe this spirituality, which has taken shape both from my own experiences and from outside influences: people I have met, figures from the past, and books. This is a form of spirituality which sees God as being deeply engaged with the world and not as some kind of superior authority figure observing us from a distance. It is a spirituality in which it is as important to enjoy creation as to protect it.

When I read about the medieval mystics Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hildegard of Bingen, I

saw in them this same affirmation of life. It was such a joy to read words written by women who lived hundreds of years ago and to recognise myself in them. It is not always easy to absorb what they say, but just as I have been helped by various authors, so too I hope I can help others to be enriched by the spirituality of these visionaries.²

A little about the book:

The first part focuses on how we can meet God within ourselves and what may stand in the way of this encounter. First and foremost I write as a woman who has felt the need to explore images of God that are different from the traditional male ones. Only in this way have I been able to seek out God.

The second part is about the various ways we can perceive the presence of God in creation. I believe we have to bridge the gulf between God and the world which has existed for so long in Christian theology. Seeing God as indwelling in creation helps us regain our reverence for earthly things, a reverence I feel is vital if we are going to be able to address global environmental concerns.

The third part of the book deals with how we can draw closer to and get to know God through our involvement in global issues. In the Old Testament book of the prophet Micah I have found three key words to reflect on here: justice, compassion and humility. My aim is to lay the foundation for a spirituality and a practical approach to life which

will help us live with a compassion that embraces people, animals and the environment.

I think many of us long for the kind of Christianity that is engaged and creation-positive: many people are open to testing new images of God when the old ones no longer work for us, and want to be God's tools in the work towards a better world. Let us be brave and determined as we develop this spirituality. We need it. The earth needs it.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a Christian in today's world? People give different answers to that question and to a great extent their answers depend on their background and the situation they find themselves in. It is the same for me too, of course. As someone involved in social issues I feel that the kind of spirituality which takes this involvement seriously has been missing in the Church and in Christian literature. I believe we must build a Christian spirituality that is truly turned out towards the world, following the example of Jesus – and we need to do it urgently. I make my contribution from where I stand in this life: as a 37-year-old woman, a member of the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) with a Catholic background, who feels an affinity with movements whose core concepts are nonviolence and radical discipleship.

It is not only among medieval mystics that I have found inspiration. Women and men of today who are looking for new terminology to use when speaking about God and the world are an inspiration to me, too – theologians whose work is influenced by the reality of this 21st century we are living in, who take global injustices, animal abuse, threats to the environment and other world issues seriously. I feel it is time for a radically different orientation. We need to take a

fresh look at God's involvement in creation and at our life as believers. Why? Because a large part of Christian spirituality throughout history has been lacking in two major ways. Firstly, it has been completely absorbed with our inner life and as a consequence has led us away from the holistic biblical view that all our relationships matter. And secondly, it has been people-centred to the absurd extent of reducing the rest of creation to a backdrop for the drama being played out between God and humans.

Many mystics express the view that creation and God are intimately interconnected, that creation flows out of God and exists in God. Mechthild of Magdeburg, who lived in the German town of Magdeburg during the thirteenth century, wrote: 'The day of my spiritual awakening was the day when I saw, and understood that I saw, all things in God and God in all things.'³ Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess living in a convent in the Rhine Valley during the twelfth century, expressed it in a slightly different way: 'And when people look at creation with sympathy, with trust, then they will see the Lord. It is God which humankind is then able to recognise in every living thing.'⁴

These quotes highlight two different perspectives. When we, as Mechthild suggests, are open to what the spirit of God wants to communicate, we see creation in a new light. And when, as Hildegard says, we relate to creation with sympathy,

we are provided with the same insight: the presence of God dwelling in all living things. The two mystics reveal different ways of obtaining knowledge about God and experiencing the closeness of God. One way takes place more in stillness, the other more in action, in relationships. I believe these are two paths which we can walk simultaneously and which offer mutual strength. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on stillness and prayer and that is why I want to promote 'to be in relationship' in various ways as a path to God: going through the different phases of life together with others, enjoying creation with all our senses, meeting others with compassion, and being engaged with life in its various forms. It is all these paths to a whole – holy – life in the world that *A Heart on Fire* wants to explore.

Knowledge beyond textbooks

Scotland, January 2007. The asphalt in front of the gates of the nuclear weapons base glittered with rainwater. It was cold and damp and I was soaked through to my underclothes after a day on the blockade. I crouched down, waiting for the police. All around me they were taking people away. A little way in front of me supporters were standing around a brazier, warming their hands. Behind them, illuminated by the security lights of the base, I could see the high fence with its coils of barbed wire at the top. The fence. Suddenly

for me it became a symbol of all violence and everything that sustains that violence. Threatening, yet not invincible. Weapons and violence – there is nothing of God in any of it. It cannot endure.

I felt happy to be there. Obviously it's not pleasant to think about such things as weapons of mass destruction, but it is liberating to come out of that limbo of simply sighing over the state of the world into doing something concrete, not letting discouragement have the last word. I was where I should be. It was good.

How do we get to know God? How do we draw close to God? As I said earlier, prayer and meditation in stillness have frequently been upheld as the principal methods. However, many Christians have also been aware that virtues such as humility, selflessness and love for others need to be practised to become established, and that a life lived in that spirit brings us closer to God. The exercises you will find throughout the book can be seen as a continuation of this tradition. They are about action and allowing ourselves to be influenced by that action. They are outward-looking. They are about our relationships – with other beings and with creation.⁵ I believe that practical exercises such as these are a long-neglected way of opening the heart, of opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit.

In the book of 1 John in the New Testament we read:

‘Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.’ By acting in a loving way towards others we will gain knowledge – not the knowledge found in textbooks but an intimate knowledge, an experience of who God is. This is what I would like to call a theory of knowledge for the spiritual life, and it forms the basis of this book. I feel I have experienced something of this truth in my own life. It was only when I became involved in work for nuclear disarmament that I began to understand the chasm between the God of life and those monsters of death. Only since getting to know women addicts in prison have I been able to be part of God’s love for them. Only after coming into contact with animals such as pigs, for example, have I felt tenderness for them, a tenderness which I believe is a part of the all-encompassing divine love for creation.

Many of the exercises in this book will influence our feelings in certain directions – towards wonder, enthusiasm and gratitude, for example. Feelings are very important in our life. Among other things, they have an enormous effect on our thoughts and actions. Think, for example, how hard it is to greet someone with a smile when you are in a bad mood. If we can influence our feelings in a positive direction, so that they support our attempts to live an involved and compassionate life, that can only be for the good.

Rediscovering mysticism

One of the purposes of this book is to demystify mysticism. Mysticism does not necessarily involve spending several hours a day in contemplation, having visions or experiencing total oneness with God. Mysticism is also those moments of wonder, joy and love of life – as well as pain caused by the suffering of others – which we all experience. To be receptive to life and to offer ourselves in the struggle for life is an approach we all can adopt, each in our own way.

The word mysticism comes from the Greek *mystikos* which originally meant ‘connected with the mysteries’. In Greek and Roman society it was associated with secret practices in cults, in which only the initiated could take part. Gradually it came to mean ‘shutting off one’s senses’ to search for wisdom in the inner self. It was not until the 6th or 7th century that the word took on a Christian meaning, when a Syrian monk wrote a work called *Mystical Theology*. The phenomenon that the monk wrote about – to still the mind and search for God in your inner self – was nothing new for Christians, however. It had earlier been called contemplation.

One dictionary defines mysticism as ‘deep subjective religiosity’, but do you have to shut off the senses, and therefore the outer world, to experience deep spirituality? The traditional western view has been that outside influences are a distraction. Asceticism, an attempt to discipline the body and

mind, has mainly been concerned with trying to avoid these influences. One example of this approach can be found in a book on spiritual life from the beginning of the 1900s, which describes admiringly how Saint Laurent Justinian abstained from gazing at the beautiful countryside and the trees in his garden, even though he had the opportunity to do so.⁶

That sounds ridiculous to us today. Naturally it pleases God when we enjoy the beauties of creation. Sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell – our senses and all the experiences which come through them are gifts from God. So, do we never need to switch off our sensory perception? Sometimes – and certainly more now than in the Middle Ages – there are too many sensory impressions than are good for us. There is not enough time to work through everything we experience, nor do we have time to listen to our own inner voice, and of course that's not good. But to say that we occasionally need to slacken the pace is a completely different thing from saying that in themselves sensory impressions are detrimental to spiritual life.

I have searched for definitions of mysticism which include this positive view of creation and the senses. One author writes that mysticism is about 'entering the fullness of the mystery of our existence, the gift and blessing of creation itself⁷, and doing this with an openness to the Divine Mystery, the One who sustains all that exists. I think that is a definition of mysticism that opens up in us a desire to live life to

the full. My own definition, or working hypothesis, is this: to affirm the divine presence in all creation, including myself, and to act accordingly.

But definitions don't say it all. Another way to approach the issue is to look at the life mystics lead. Most of the mystics and saints we remember today lived their lives as an expression of prophetic involvement: criticising injustice, serving the poor and reaching out to people seen as unworthy. Their life was a part of God's own life, goodness and love which encompasses us all. Theirs are the footsteps we follow, those of us who want to be mystics in the world. The path is not always easy or straight, but there is much joy to be had. It is my hope that more people will discover this path – a path to bring about change in us and in the world.



God in engagement

When I was 16 I travelled to Paraguay as an exchange student. For one year I lived with the Rotela family in the capital city, Asunción. The father of the family owned a metal workshop, the mother was a dentist. They had a good middle-class life. After a couple of months I joined a youth group in the local church. We met once a week, read the Bible, discussed things together and became involved in various social projects. This is where I met Any, who remained a close friend for many years afterwards. Whenever I returned to Paraguay I stayed with her. She lived with her mother and her grandmother in a little house near the church and here the standard of living was something else entirely: one room where everyone slept, a toilet at the back of the house, only cold water.

During my first year in Paraguay I thought a lot about the different living conditions of people around the world. Although I never saw extreme poverty it was obvious that not everyone had what they needed to live a decent life. There was an older woman who lived alone in a shabby, dark room next to our house. If the mother of the Rotela family hadn't taken dinner to her every day she probably would have starved to death. Many people had no medical insurance and fared badly when they became ill. I planned to train as something useful – a midwife, I thought – and come back to work

with and for poor people.

That didn't quite happen. I did go back after I had trained to be a nurse, and worked for a few months in a hospital, but I didn't end up being a charity worker. Even though I went on to more advanced nurse's training, I wasn't very happy in nursing and left that career a few years later. Nonetheless, I have carried my experiences from Paraguay with me: the feeling of urgency – if there are people who don't have what they need then we must do something about it – and a longing to devote my life to meaningful activity. I hope I am less naïve today than I was then. Then I didn't see the political connotations, nor what it was that prevented people from rising up out of poverty. I had the attitude that as long as we worked together, issues would be resolved.

Meeting people who live in different circumstances is good for us and helps us develop a perspective on life, but we don't have to travel to South America to do that. One way is to get to know people in our own countries whose experience of life is different from ours: people who have fled oppression in their home country or who have grown up in poverty and who perhaps still have family members whose lives are affected by this distress. Everyday life is a battle for survival for very many people. I think that when you live in a rich country awareness of these problems can easily become theoretical. It needs to be brought to life by meeting the people concerned.

We have to question a mysticism that does not lead to increased compassion and an involvement in issues of justice – that has been the message from many spiritual people throughout history. There is something self-evident about this. If God is the love that flows through every creature and the whole of creation, and we are receptive to this God, then our heart will be opened more and more to the suffering of others, and we will be affected by all situations in which humans or animals are not treated with love.

Priests, ministers and authors of inspirational literature often insist that prayer affects our actions in this world. Seldom or never do we read that work for justice is a way into God's heart, and that's a pity, because I believe it would be a liberation for many Christians who feel themselves drawn primarily to this way of knowing and serving God. I also believe it is a part of our biblical inheritance. When the prophet Jeremiah warned King Jehoiakim about God's judgement if he continued to oppress the poor, he reminded him how Jehoiakim's father Josiah had had a completely different way of ruling. "He defended the cause of the poor and the needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord.⁶³

Spiritual growth is complex, but I am convinced that our actions have a deep effect on our inner life. Luckily there are theologians today who offer a broader approach to gaining an understanding of God, and how we are connected to God.

The British Catholic Anne Primavesi, for example, wants ‘to establish physical experience and practical works as both a source and an expression of God-knowledge.’⁶⁴ Through action, our own and that of others, we can learn to know God better.

God is like a parent, tenderly loving creation and longing for justice for all God’s children. Our calling is to enter into the same attitude towards the world and ourselves. When we act with reverence for the rest of creation and when we struggle so that all may live a life of dignity, we come closer to that which is holy. We come closer to God.

Ethics of mysticism

When Martin de Porres (1579–1639) saw injured stray dogs on the streets of Lima he took them back to his monastery cell to care for them. The other monks protested, calling them ‘filthy dogs’. When George Fox, founder of the Quakers in the 17th century, received a divine revelation and became convinced that there is ‘something of God’ in every person, he became an advocate of pacifism. Although he and many Quakers after him have been punished for their refusal to take part in war, they have stood fast by their belief that they should not cause harm to anyone.

Before we take a closer look at how justice, compassion and humility can be guidelines for spiritual life in the world, I

would like to reflect on the characteristics of that engagement with society which is an expression of mysticism. What should be its hallmarks? What is the ethical outcome of a mystical approach? To simplify the question I would like to summarise the mystics' message in three points and consider the ethical consequences of each.

God lives in everything and everyone. What will be the consequences for my life if I choose to trust this mystical wisdom? I think it should be the same for us as it was for George Fox: that it changes our entire way of life and puts us on a collision course with many of the world's norms. It means that reverence becomes the blueprint for how we relate to the world around us. We know to value earthly things because, in Hildergard's words, 'there is nothing created that does not contain a ray of [God's] radiance, not foliage or seed or flower or any other beautiful creation.'⁶⁵

Just as Fox saw something of God in every person, we can see something of God in every being, thanks to the increased knowledge we have today about animals' emotions and their capacity to feel pain. We see how animals take delight in the pleasures of life and we acknowledge that their joy of living, just like ours, comes from God. We see their physical beauty as an expression of God's creativity. Like the Peruvian saint Martin de Porres we see animals as God's children, and as such our brothers and sisters, and go to great lengths not to harm

or kill them, striving instead to be their protectors.

One consequence of seeing God in everything is that we are drawn away from the fateful division of reality into worldly and spiritual. Our lives, with all their life-affirming constituent parts, become holy. Or rather, we discover the holiness which has always been present. Gardening, social work, cooking, care of bodies – reverence leads us into a right attitude towards each other and towards creation.

All living things belong together and are connected. How are we to interpret this view of belonging? Do I have a greater responsibility for someone because I feel we belong together? If so, why? I don't think this works as a moral principle. Even if we are completely separated from each other there should still be solidarity between us. However I think we will be encouraged enormously if we dare to believe in the connectedness of everything. It helps us to identify with others, especially those with whom we don't feel a natural affinity.

We can also find support today in the way physics interprets the world. In a purely concrete way all the parts of creation are connected. Every particle belongs to one single global wave function because they have all at some time during history worked together. Therefore each particle's destiny is inseparably connected with the whole of the universe.⁶⁶

God's relationship to the world is stamped by intimate love. Know-

ing this gives us courage in our work towards a better world. Everything is encompassed by love. That means we should never give up hope for a person or a situation. ‘See, I lead everything to the end to which I ordained it from without beginning by the same might, wisdom and love by which I made it,’ said God to Julian.⁶⁷ Often we don’t understand how a situation can be resolved, how good is going to triumph, but our task is to persevere, trusting that God’s love will finally bring everything to its completion.

Faith in God’s eternal and constant love also forbids us to condemn other people. Nobody is a hopeless case. We cannot support policies that say certain people do not have the right to live or ever be released from prison. We have taken on board the mystics’ view of humanity: one part of us is always worthy, always beautiful before God, whatever dreadful things we do.

Remember joy

The Ploughshares Movement is an international peace movement which campaigns for disarmament using nonviolent civil disobedience. When I joined this movement I discovered a new way of working. Their approach was a mixture of the alternative meeting methods of the women’s movement and the spiritual decision-making processes of nuns and priests. Several Catholic priests and nuns took part in the first

Ploughshares groups. They brought with them a form in which reflection on a text (often a biblical text) and silence were important ingredients. The women's and peace movements contributed with tools to promote participation, such as go-rounds, in which the delegates speak in turn and no one is interrupted. The result was a calm process where each individual had plenty of time to work out his or her feelings and thoughts. Even though the activities that were planned and carried out could lead to a certain amount of stress – for example, disarmament actions potentially resulting in fines or imprisonment – I experienced the process in our group as both fortifying and surprisingly easy. It involved every part of me – my worries, desires, spirituality and political considerations.

I was probably a little spoilt beginning my political engagement in this way because when I later participated in other movements which had more traditional methods of operation I often found it frustrating. Main meetings were always very time-consuming and even then not everyone had an opportunity to express their opinion. There was the difficulty of getting to know people when small groups weren't used, or were short-lived. Engagement and private life were kept separate and we were not encouraged to be personal. I felt stressed and found the work joyless. I think that the different working methods are partly to do with spirituality. In the Ploughshares Movement a spirituality remains, even though many activists today would not define themselves as religious or spiritual.

In many ways I have experienced what you might call a mystical attitude within the peace movement. Joy and celebration, silence and worship, symbols and rites – all this has had an important place.

At a peace camp in Washington DC during the summer of 2000 there were about forty of us who travelled to the Pentagon, the headquarters of the US Department of Defense. We wanted to draw attention to their responsibility for the sanctions which were so badly affecting civilians in Iraq. A couple of women had prepared a rather unusual litany. While we sat on the wide steps which led up to the entrance, and as the police vehicles began to arrive, they slowly read words from a long list of all those items which could not be sent to Iraq because of the sanctions: cleaning materials, pencils, heart lung machines, pharmaceuticals, and so on. The assembled people joined in with a repeated refrain.

We have walked for days on pilgrimages, often with a weapons factory as our goal. A pilgrimage is a time for both conversation and quiet reflection, at the same time as being a political manifestation. Sometimes Buddhist monks and nuns from the Nipponzan Myohoji order have accompanied us. Their prayers and the regular beat of their drums encouraged our steps when our bodies felt heavy. At our second trial in England, following a disarmament action against British nuclear weapons, one of the nuns turned up outside the court every day. She prayed in front of a picture of Hiroshima in

ruins after the atom bomb.

On the mornings of the trial we walked in a procession through the town, from the church which was our gathering place, to the court. In the square outside the building we formed a large circle and sang a song, and someone would explain what was going to happen during the trial that day. To finish we would remember people killed or imprisoned because of their work for justice and peace. We were told their name and a little bit about them, then we all answered together: '*Presente!*' ('present' in Spanish).

At every Ploughshares trial a party is organised and at our trials in England there were several. People take the opportunity to meet up; often they come from many different countries to show their support. The spirit of community and the resistance to violence is worth celebrating.

The activities and systems we oppose have an overwhelmingly destructive power. It is easy to lose courage. But there is another danger, that of being affected during the struggle by the very things we are fighting against. The danger of losing our compassion and creativity. Of starting to divide the world into good and bad. Of letting the end justify the means. That's why we need to arm ourselves with all the good tools available to us, including mysticism. As you can see from the examples above, I don't feel this has to be specifically Christian. It can be Buddhist, Jewish, a general spirituality, or from another tradi-

tion. The most important thing is that we help each other bring out the power and joy that exists in spirituality: the hope of a better world, belief in the power of love, the knowledge that we all belong together as sisters and brothers.

So, search for methods and activities which you find give you strength – and say no to those ways and means which drain you of your power. Enjoy life even in the midst of your campaigning! If we can't have fun while we work, we won't last long in the struggle for good. Moreover, life is not just about work, however meaningful it is. We need to relax at times, too, by doing something completely different. For me that can mean coffee and a pastry in a café, or a shot of humour from a TV series – *Friends* is my favourite – to end the day.