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Becoming

an

ORDINARY

Mystic

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE REST OF US

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Chapter 1

RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

MINDFULNESS BREEDS MYSTICISM



I had just flown back to Texas the night before, and here I was again at the Dallas–Ft. Worth International Airport, preparing to fly to San Diego where I would preach for five days. Having been on the road preaching and teaching for three consecutive weeks, I was weary. Luckily, because I am a Premier 1K frequent flyer on United Airlines, I received a free upgrade to first class.

I boarded the plane, settled into my seat, and searched the free television shows on the screen in front of me. I also sipped some orange juice, stretched my legs, and looked forward to some rest during the three-hour flight to California.

Once we reached our cruising attitude of thirty-seven thousand feet, the pilot welcomed us and turned off the “Fasten Seat Belts” sign. By this time, I was thoroughly engrossed in a movie and enjoying myself. Suddenly a question came out of nowhere. *Did I lock my car before leaving the airport parking lot?* I became distracted and unsettled.

The question niggled at the back of my mind. I shifted in my seat and asked myself again, *Did I or didn't I lock the car?* I couldn't remember hearing the car beep, indicating it had been locked. Before long, I was beating myself up. *How could I have been so foolish and irresponsible? What if someone breaks into my car?*

Though physically I was in the first-class cabin thirty-seven thousand feet in the sky, mentally I was still on the ground, stuck in the DFW airport parking lot with guilt from the past and worry about the future. I was again in two places at once.

STUCK IN THE AIRPORT PARKING LOT

Many of us experience this divisive bilocation. Some of us are here and yet we live in the past, beating ourselves up with guilt for something we did days, months, or even years ago. Kieran lives with the daily guilt that his drinking has destroyed his family. Jason bitterly regrets waiting a day before returning to his mother's bedside; she died early that morning. Marge wishes she could erase last year's act of infidelity. The Chinese say, "Don't let yesterday use up too much of today," but some people allow it to do just that. Guilt drains us emotionally, keeping us morosely self-absorbed and unable to be present to the moment at hand.

Others are like Marc. "I'm a worry wart," he confessed. "I fret over whether I'll have enough money saved for my retirement. I lose sleep over my children and the choices they are making. I stew over tomorrow's staff meeting and agonize, *Do I have everything prepared that my boss wants?*" People like Marc bite their fingernails and obsess over things they cannot control. A Chinese proverb says, "That the birds of worry and care fly over your head, this you cannot change; but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent."

A newborn baby, on the other hand, doesn't know the past or future. An infant lives in the present moment. When she is hungry, she cries. When he sees something pleasurable, he smiles. An infant demonstrates that guilt, worry, and anxiety are not natural. These responses are *learned* as we grow up and mature: "Just wait until your father gets home!" teaches the young boy to feel guilty; over-hearing a fretting parent saying, "I'm not sure how we are going to pay the bills this month" exposes a young girl to worry and anxiety. These learned responses keep us on the ground and stuck in the airport parking lot.

So often people say that we should look to the elderly, learn from their wisdom, their many years. I disagree, I say we should look to the young: untarnished, without stereotypes implanted in their minds, no poison, no hatred in their hearts. When we learn to see life through the eyes of a child, that is when we become truly wise.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Jesus insisted we unlearn a lot. He did not want us to be imprisoned in the past with guilt and regret. So much of his ministry was focused on forgiving and freeing sinners from their past (Matthew 9:6; Luke 7:47; 23:34). Because Jesus did not want us stumbling into tomorrow with worry and anxiety, he urged followers to live in the present moment (Matthew 6:34). His teaching was simple and direct: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

LIVING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

There's a lot of contemporary chatter on the web, social media, and television about being mindful and living in the present moment. International bestsellers such as Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*:

A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment cause us to wonder: “What’s the big deal? How can this practice be helpful to the Christian disciple?”

The practice of mindfulness is traditionally associated with Buddhism. In that tradition, it refers to the intentional, nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. It includes attending to the here-and-now and monitoring the thoughts that float down the stream of consciousness. We don’t judge those thoughts—we just notice them and let them go. The focus is on ourselves and how our thoughts, sometimes judgmental, shape our understanding and reaction to the present moment. By monitoring our thoughts and their interpretations of different situations, we discover how the mind is a source of so much suffering.

For the past fifty years, many medical doctors and psychologists have promoted mindfulness as a technique to achieve a healthy lifestyle. It has been proven to help reduce depression, stress, and addiction. It can increase inner peace.

And it’s not just beneficial to our mental and physical health—it’s also useful for efficiency and productivity in the workplace. In 2007, Google started offering its employees a seven-week mindfulness meditation course called Search Inside Yourself. Those who have gone through the course speak of being calmer, clear-headed, and more focused.

I’m not a Buddhist. I’m not a medical doctor. I don’t work for Google. I’m a committed Christian and a Franciscan priest. I won’t argue with the benefits of mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition or according to medical science and the *Harvard Business Review*. Our thoughts and inner dialogue do, in fact, enslave us at times. Mindfulness techniques do, in fact, help many people live a fuller, more productive life. However, our Christian tradition offers a richer, deeper understanding of the present moment that goes far beyond

a cessation of mental suffering, physical ailments, and work distractions. Indeed, it fosters a mystical spirituality that leads to being reborn as a child.

Abandonment to Divine Providence, traditionally ascribed to the late seventeenth, mid-eighteenth century Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade, gives us some insight into the Christian mysticism of the here-and-now. De Caussade calls the present moment a “sacrament.” It is holy because it is the portal through which God and angels walk into our lives. Think of the Lord visiting Abraham and receiving hospitality at Abraham’s tent in Mamre (Genesis 18:1-33) or Gabriel’s visit and invitation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). To live with attention to the present moment is to be open to a divine visitation.

The story of elderly Simeon also alerts us to this (Luke 2:25-35). Though the elderly are often stereotyped as living in the past with sentimentality, the devout Simeon eagerly lives in the present and waits for a divine promise to be fulfilled: to see the Lord’s Messiah. His eyes are wide open and his heart is tight with expectation. When Joseph and Mary bring the newborn Jesus into the temple to perform the customary rituals of the Mosaic law, Spirit-led Simeon’s heart breaks wide open and flowers, his eyes twinkle, and he betrays his mindfulness of the present moment with the first words out of his mouth: “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word” (Luke 2:29). With a mystical vision rooted in the present moment, this righteous man gazes upon the divine.

The prophetess Anna reveals to us another kind of mindfulness, born not of a Spirit-impulse like Simeon’s, but from seventy-seven years of grieving in continual temple prayers and fasting (Luke 2:36-38). In a flash, the veil of the ordinary is momentarily lifted and she beholds the Word made flesh in an infant. This moment

moves her to break forth in praise as she witnesses the beginning of salvation history's conclusion.

But the present moment is a sacrament for another reason. In de Caussade's words, "Every moment we live through is like an ambassador who declares the will of God." The here-and-now should not be dismissed or ignored because it reveals the divine longings and yearnings in the most ordinary of situations: the outstretched hand of the poor, the cry of the infant, the twinge of conscience to forgive a neighbor, or the Alzheimer's patient needing to be fed. This moment's unmet need or required duty, as Abraham and Mary remind us, affirms and proclaims God's ardent longing and enthusiastic invitation to a deeper relationship with each one of us. If a familial relationship with Jesus is determined by doing the will of God (Matthew 12:50), ordinary mystics are those who attentively respond with childlike wonder to the simple, tedious details of everyday living. "Thy will be done." Mindfulness breeds mysticism.

When he was in charge of the young Jesuits preparing for the priesthood, the future Pope Francis offered them this wise advice: "Do what you are doing and do it well." That's living in the sacrament of the present moment and responding to the will of God.

"DOING THE WILL OF GOD"

I lived with elderly Brother Leon for a number of years. Long retired from his ministry as a bookkeeper for the Franciscan outreach to the poor and needy of Chicago, he spent his days praying, watching television, cleaning the friary kitchen, straightening up our recreation room, and taking care of any other domestic need. He did it all quietly and efficiently. At day's end, when asked how he had spent his day, Leon had a direct and simple reply: "Doing the will of God."

Over the years, he had discovered this moment's unmet need or required duty was the ambassador of the divine will.

Each minute of life has its peculiar duty—regardless of the appearance that minute may take. The Now-moment is the moment of salvation. Each complaint against it is a defeat; each act of resignation to it is a victory. The moment is always an indication to us of God's will. . . . Nothing is more individually tailored to our spiritual needs than the Now-moment; for that reason it is an occasion of knowledge which can come to no one else. This moment is my school, my textbook, my lesson. . . . To accept the duty of this moment for God is to touch Eternity, to escape from time.

Fulton J. Sheen

“But isn’t it reckless to live like Brother Leon? As a parent, I need to be sensible. As an employee, I need to be conscientious. Isn’t it irresponsible to be attentive to the present moment and neglect the past and future?” you might ask. Yes, it certainly is! But living in the present moment and responding to its unmet need or required duty do not mean ignoring the past and future. Rather, they require us, as Brother Leon reminded me, to be attentive to the sacrament of the present moment as an ambassador—an expression—of God’s will right here, right now. If the present moment is asking me to look at the past and balance my checkbook or make an examination of conscience, I do it. If it is asking me to live in the future and plan the menu for next week or discuss my retirement plans with a financial planner, I do it. It’s not a matter of choosing between the past, present, or future. It’s a matter of being present to where I am and allowing this ambassador to show me where my focus should be—and what God’s will is.

“KEEP DEATH BEFORE YOUR EYES”

Ninety-three-year-old Brother David Steindl-Rast, OSB, is an internationally known author, scholar, and Benedictine monk. When Oprah Winfrey interviewed him on *Super Soul Sunday*, he offered a practical way to live in the present moment.

Steindl-Rast grew up in Nazi-occupied Austria and mentioned how, with bombs dropping everywhere, “you are so surprised you are still alive. That forced me to live in the present moment.” He continued with a story about one of his teachers giving the class homework due for the following Thursday. “The whole class broke out laughing,” Steindl-Rast chuckled. “*Next Thursday?* Who knows if there’ll be a next Thursday?” The daily possibility of death had taught him and his classmates how to live in the here-and-now.

Out of spite for his Nazi teachers who didn’t want the students reading anything spiritual, the future Benedictine monk began reading the Rule of St. Benedict. Discovering Benedict’s admonition in chapter four—“Keep death before your eyes at all times”—Steindl-Rast admitted, “That sentence touched me deeply. I realized later on that brought me great joy—to have death before me at all times—because it forced me to live in the present moment.”

I mentioned this idea of keeping death before our eyes to Salvador, a spiritual directee, who missed the point. “I don’t want to live with an obsession about the morality of every action I perform,” he said. “To live with death before my eyes makes me cower with shame, guilt, and self-remorse over my past sins and want to hide in the bushes. It makes me nervous and instills fear over God’s future judgment.”

Steindl-Rast’s own experience and the Benedictine tradition offer another time-tested perspective and interpretation. Living with death in front of us is not meant to inspire fear about the past or distress about the future; it is meant to inspire fascination and delight in

this very moment unfolding before us. Like suddenly finding ourselves at a dead end, death jolts us to the present moment and invites us to become aware of where we are right here, right now. From watching the sun set below the horizon to hearing a song that jogs a memory from high school, death inspires—from the Latin *inspirare*, “to breathe or blow into,” originally used of a divine being, in the sense “impart a truth or idea to someone”—the celebration of life. It calls us back to the first-class cabin.

A FOUR-STEP METHOD

I was five years old when my mother taught me how to cross the street. “Always remember, Albert,” she told me, “when you get to the curb, stop, look, listen—and if you don’t see or hear anything—go.” Those four simple steps are helpful for living in the present moment and experiencing the mysticism of the mundane. Here’s a simple two-minute practice that will bring you back to where you are.

Start by *stopping*. Deliberately call yourself out of the airport parking lot and come back to the first-class cabin. “Re-collect” and gather yourself from all the different places where you are mentally bilocating—whether they be in the past or future.

I remember Catherine telling me her method of recollection. “I intentionally and momentarily pause and close my eyes. I take a few deep breaths. *Cathy*, I ask myself, *where are you?* And I reply, *I’m here, right here*. I open my eyes and briefly look around. Believe it or not, I suddenly find myself right where I am. It works every time.”

Once you have returned to the present moment with recollection, *look*. Pay attention to your senses. What are you hearing? Seeing? Feeling? Tasting? Smelling? Your five senses are the keys that open the tabernacle door to the sacrament of the present moment. It’s important that you take your time and dally and delight here. Focus

on your sense of smell if you're in a flower shop; taste your seafood gumbo; feel the softness of the baby's skin; listen to the coo of the mourning dove; see the desperation on the beggar's face. Fully experience this utterly unique and unrepeatable moment. It will never, ever happen again.

Years ago, I had the opportunity to travel through Western Europe. Flying into Belgium, I slowly snaked my way by train through Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, and Italy. I was intent on photographing notable landmarks and tourist sites. Upon my return home, I went through the photos and noticed I had seen Bruges's belfry and Halle, Munich's Marienplatz, Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace, the artworks on display in Kunsthaus Zürich, Paris's Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe, and Rome's Colosseum and Trevi Fountain. But as I looked at my photos, I kept wondering, *Was I really there?* I had no memory of being at any of those places. The only vivid memory I had from my European trip was walking the grounds of Dachau concentration camp in silence and horror; I had brought my camera, but once on the grounds of the camp, I realized it was inappropriate to even think about taking photographs.

I learned an important lesson from the trip. Photographs are incapable of replacing what only our five senses can capture: the experience of the now, the sacrament of the present moment.

Having attended to your five senses, briefly *listen*. Reflect upon what your senses are registering. My friend Dennis finds it helpful to ask himself, *What is God saying to me right now? What is God asking me to do?* Momentarily pausing and pondering these two questions might reveal an unmet need or required duty. This third step is letting the present moment be the ambassador that declares God's will.

Being present with full attention is the practice: we do God's will moment by moment, and we surrender wholeheartedly any concern about fruits of action (outcomes). We place ourselves in God's hands and have no inner commentary about how we did and how what we did unfolded. We know not if we will be of any benefit to others or ourselves.

Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

Your recollection (stop), attention (look), and reflection (listen) should blossom into a response. *Go*. The unmet need or required duty might call you to prayer or contemplative silence. It might ask you to share your time, talents, or treasure with someone less fortunate. It might require changing a diaper or resisting the temptation to snap a photograph with your cell phone. It might challenge you to visit a neighbor and offer an apology. The ordinary mystic—like elderly Abram and Sarai as they sat at home (see Genesis 12:1-9), the young Samuel lying in the temple (see 1 Samuel 3:1-9), Matthew at his workplace (see Matthew 9:9-13), the Samaritan woman attending to her household needs (see John 4:1-42), or Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree (see Luke 19:1-10)—is only too aware that God is inviting a response right here, right now.

For those who live with mindfulness, every moment is a divine invitation. By day's end when asked what you did all day, you can reply with Brother Leon's answer, "I did the will of God."

I remember a radio interview when I presented this simple two-minute technique. Someone called in and took exception to it. "Father," the woman asked, "isn't this a bit awkward and contrived?"

I couldn't have agreed more. It *is* artificial and forced. But that awkwardness betrays just how little time we spend right here, right now. We have to make a conscious effort and deliberately return to—or maybe it would be more accurate to say, *arrive at*—where we actually are.

By practicing this two-minute technique a couple of times a day, you'll be on the road to forming a new habit. Gradually that habit will become second nature. Before you know it, you'll surprise yourself by suddenly being right where you are! That's how an adult becomes a child—and an ordinary mystic.

EFFECTS

Craig was driving along the highway when he saw a car parked to the side of the road with its emergency lights blinking and a woman standing beside it. Still feeling the Christmas spirit, Craig made a U-turn, went back, and parked behind the stopped vehicle.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"I have a flat tire."

Craig looked inside the automobile and saw a man wearing leg braces and a young child in a car seat.

"I think I can help you," he said.

After helping the passengers get out of the car, Craig opened the trunk and went about changing the tire.

Twenty minutes later, the woman thanked him profusely, got back into the car with her passengers, and drove away.

The following day, at Sunday Mass on the Feast of the Holy Family, his thoughts returned to the family he had helped. When the priest casually mentioned, "The Holy Family touches us and comes into our lives in the most ordinary of ways," Craig was dumbfounded. He cocked his head, fought back tears, and asked himself in wonder, *Could they really have been the Holy Family?*

Mindfulness compels us, as it did with Craig, to respond to the unmet need or required duty at hand. That response can lead to wonder and surprise, two childlike qualities delighting the God of disguise. Jesus hinted at this in his parable about the judgment

of the nations (see Matthew 25:31-46). The righteous at the right hand of the Son of Man are invited to inherit the kingdom prepared for them: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36). The righteous are dumbfounded and caught off guard. Fearing the Son of Man was mistaken, they ask in astonishment, “When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?” Highlighting the sacrament of the present moment, the Son of Man responds, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Like Craig and the parable’s righteous ones, we are not always consciously aware we are standing at the portal to the sacred. Nevertheless, with ardent longing and an enthusiastic invitation to a deeper relationship, God provides this moment’s unmet need or required duty as an opportunity for us to get a foothold in the door. Our loving, spontaneous response—be it playful, pragmatic, or proactive—will sometimes unveil a touch of the divine and, in retrospect, awaken surprise, wonder, and awe. These three emotions fuel ordinary mystics.

The spiritual journey challenges us not to feel guilty about the past or anxious about the future; our task is to surrender the past to the mercy of God and to offer the future in trust to God. Our daily pilgrimage is to the first-class cabin called the present moment. Here we experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, as God and angels call us in an unmet need or required duty. There is mysticism in this mundane moment for those who live with mindfulness.

Practice

Spend two minutes experiencing the sacrament and ambassador of the present moment by practicing the four steps: stop, look, listen, go.

What did you discover about God's invitation and will for you right here, right now?

If possible, commit to practicing this exercise three or four times tomorrow. In the evening, assess its usefulness for you.

Reflect

1. How does Brother Leon's understanding of the will of God confirm or challenge your understanding of the will of God?
2. What are some of the common unmet needs or required duties of your daily life? How mindful are you that they are potential portals to the sacred?

Ponder

Mysticism begins with living in the sacrament of the present moment and allowing this ambassador to declare God's will in its unmet need or required duty.

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