Reflection: “the unexamined life...” - Lenten Reflection #3 (2012)

“...I say that to talk about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living,...”  Plato, Apology 38a

I spoke last week about Doubt and those thoughts have led me to think some about the ways I reflect on life.

I sometimes turn my thoughts outward. Intellectual curiosity, for example, always causes me to look outside of myself - in the form of scholarship, or study, or investigation. Exploration, even of places and things long since worked-out by others, is always fresh and rewarding for me. Memories, too, cause me to look outside of myself. As I make memory, my thoughts turn to the person or experience or event that gave rise to the memory in the first place - recollection takes the form of retrospection.

The discovery of meaning from memories or understanding, on the other hand, relies on introspection. We find cause to look inward when we process experience. Meaning for us is always relational and thus we develop our self-awareness, acquire ‘I-consciousness,’ through the process of introspection.

As T.S. Eliot said in “The Dry Salvages [3rd of his 4 quartets].”

"We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness. I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only?
But of many generations – not forgetting."

One of the assignments I give my Capstone students is to prepare a narrative of their Spiritual Milestones – the formative experiences, people, places or things that have had a profound influence on them, and have contributed to their understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

I use a nautical metaphor to describe the purpose of the exercise.

At sea, the way you determine your heading and progress is to look back at where you have been.

This is called “dead-reckoning” and involves determining your position at regular intervals (by a variety of methods), recording those locations or fixes on a chart, and extrapolating forward to indicate your direction of travel.

Currents and tides cause changes in progress and direction that are not revealed with a compass, so simply pointing the boat in a certain direction is not accurate enough.
I think that to find a ‘true’ course in life requires a kind of dead-reckoning, too, in the form of introspection.

The doubts we have, for example, of the kind I spoke of last week, are like the uncertainties in a compass heading caused by tides and winds. They can only be put into reliable perspective by knowing ourselves well enough to recognize what has been profoundly meaningful in our past.

And as Eliot said, we also can rely on the corrections of others before us, as he said not on “the experience of one life only but of many generations – not forgetting.”

Self-reflection is the wonderful capacity we all have to exercise introspection, that is, to ponder our fundamental nature, purpose, and essence.

Lent seems always to take me to this sort of activity. So you might say that this Lenten Reflection is a reflection on reflection!

Now I am not talking about “navel gazing.” Neither am I talking about intellectual inquiry or even idle curiosity.

Instead, I am thinking about the profound reality of our encounters with an immanent and transcendent God and with His creation.

I am thinking here about our encounters with Mystery.

I have heard many (mostly disappointing) definitions of spirituality.

For me, spirituality must be something like our two questions from last week: “Who am I?” and “What Am I to do about it?”

There must be two parts to spirituality; the first part is our encounter with God, and the second part is our response to that encounter.

Encounter is experience and through introspection we discern our response to that experience.

We can also see that this must necessarily represent an ongoing process, a regular and continual engagement. Like dead-reckoning, our spirituality is dynamic. You can’t just do it once and get it right!

And so how do we begin?

Perhaps we should start with some thoughts about how we encounter Mystery? In other words, where do we find God in our lives?
There are certainly special moments in our lives; moments of profound clarity, beauty, or connectedness when it is obvious to us that we are in His presence.

At other times, we experience dimensions that are beyond our comprehension, as the feeling of smallness we can have in the face of a great storm, or the vastness of the sea.

There is a beautiful prayer that comes to us from the Breton Fishermen:

“Lord the sea is so large and my boat is so small.”

You can just sense the fear, and the faithfulness, and the trust all at once in this short oration. This is clearly an example of encounter with Mystery.

We can also encounter Mystery in the form of feeling larger in some way than we understand ourselves to be.

The intense love we feel for another person, which can overwhelm us, surprise us, even frighten us, is one example. It has a largess, a generosity of spirit or attitude, that our humility won’t allow us to comprehend in ourselves.

Other examples include the underserved love we receive from others, the inexplicable goodness of our communities toward us, or the kindness of complete strangers.

Parents surely encounter Mystery when they become aware of the complete dependence on them of an infant, and the awesome responsibilities attendant on that relationship.

All these things can feel out of proportion with our sense of identity or self-value, and we are left wondering.

Well this certainly is not an exhaustive list of encounters with Mystery, but I think we all have a sense for what I’m thinking about.

We sometimes refer to these times of as moments of clarity, or eternal moments, or as T. S. Eliot called them timeless moments - “the intersections of time with the timeless” or encounters “at the still point of the turning world”.

He said of the still point, “there is the dance, and there is only the dance.” The dance for him is his vision of unity with Mystery.

And that, in my construction, along with our faithful response, is our Spirituality.

Introspection followed by action - dead-reckoning in order to set a new course.

In “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot said also:

“For most of us, there is only the unattended Moment, the moment in and out of time,”
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightening
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
Incarnation."

Teilhard de Chardin claimed that we encounter God in all things – in all our activities and all our passivities.

He said that all the things done by us and all the things undergone by us are divinized - they matter, they contribute to or detract from the ongoing creation of God’s Kingdom.

If he is right, then, self-reflection must be as ongoing as the things we do and the things we experience.

We may rightly conclude that introspection should be a daily activity.

We ought daily to discover where we find God in our lives, and possibly also where we did no find God!

As in dead-reckoning, we need to discover and record our spiritual longitude and latitude with regularity.

And periodically we need to extrapolate forward to a new course, one refined and purified by our past progress.

Lent is a time that invites us into this navigational planning.

Our guest preacher a couple of weeks ago, Craig Ford, informed us that we begin the Lenten season with the scriptural promise of a new beginning. From Isaiah 43: 18 and 19 we have:

"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Lent, he told us is a season for renewal and rededication to God.

But what would be the point of setting off in the same old direction?

Should we really forget the former things and things of old, or should we learn from them?
Can doing the same old things possibly produce new results for us?

I agree that in Lent we are invited to renew our commitment and to rededicate ourselves to God, and I think we are called to accomplish that through change.

To repent means just that, 'to think differently after.'

There is another dimension to this topic I would like to mention also.

Introspection is certainly an active process. We intentionally engage our minds and our hearts to find new meaning in life. We actively think through and attempt to understand the meaning of our experiences.

There are also times when the appropriate response to Mystery is simply listening.

There can be passive, or more appropriately receptive, modes of response during which we simply listen to or receive direction.

We must not rely only on ourselves to discover where we found God in our lives, but allow God Himself to reveal His presence to us.

In a sense, we have to get out of our own way in our process of reflection and discovery.

Ignatius Loyola called these times Contemplation.

These are the moments outside of time and outside of experience when we can be formed into a new thing.

We cannot create these moments, we can’t make them happen by any formula or recipe or trick.

We simply have to allow them, by getting out of the way. We listen and wait as we reflect contemplatively.

If by grace, God chooses to reveal Himself to us in these times, we are truly blessed.

And we will be blessed, for God asks us, “do you not perceive it?” This new Thing!

If you have wondered at all about the title of my Lenten Series, you may see now why I chose “Lent is for Sinners – the perfect need not apply.”

In Mark 2:17 Jesus tells us:

“And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."
If you are on a true course, without deviation and without doubt, then don’t change your heading.

But if, like me, you occasionally find yourself being set to one side or the other, or find you are drifting off course, or even find yourself completely lost at times, then Jesus’ words are for us.

It’s just possible that we need to reflect more carefully and to listen more intently before we renew and rededicate ourselves.

In the Lenten season, we are called to repentance. We are called to think differently of life after reflection, then to experience regret, and finally to change.

Lancelot Andrews, great Bishop and Doctor of the Church, said we must do it now!

There are rocks all around us, the sea is full of danger, and our journey is a short one.

Before our voyage ends disastrously for us, we must examine our course and, where necessary, make changes in our heading.

Lent invites us to reflect.