

9-1-2003

An Excerpt from "Holy Way"

Paula Huston
California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius>

Recommended Citation

Huston, Paula (2003) "An Excerpt from "Holy Way"," *Moebius*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 15.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol1/iss3/15>

This The Gamut is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Moebius by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact mwyngard@calpoly.edu.

AN EXCERPT FROM "HOLY WAY"

Paula Huston

Rarely did I make it to daily Mass at home despite the fact that I only had to drive a few minutes in either direction to get to a church. Without the hermitage bell outside my window, without a community who might notice my absence, I found it easier, more convenient, more me, to simply take my cup of tea and the daily missal down to the turtle pond at home or the herb garden on campus. What's the difference? I asked myself. Can't I think spiritual thoughts just as well out in nature?

The fact was I had a capricious relationship to organized worship. I wondered if this persistent ambivalence might be connected somehow to that ancient conversation with my mom the night of the Beatles concert in the Coliseum—our discussion about groupthink. Perhaps the conversation had simply confused me that night, and I had never sorted it all out. Perhaps (and here I breathed a sigh of sudden relief) it was all Mom's fault.

Certainly, she'd struck a deep chord in me with her talk of "mob hysteria." Even at twelve, I recognized what she was saying and could see what was at stake. It was a matter of the individual versus the crowd. A few years later, I stumbled onto the novels of Ayn Rand. Rand's fierce defense of the isolated human person swept me away. I was too young to grasp the political implications of her position; I only knew, caught as I was in the stormy seas of my own teenaged rebellion, that she was speaking directly to me. According to Ayn (what a fascinating name, I thought, not having the slightest clue about how to pronounce it), one had to fight hard for autonomy. It was life's most noble lifetime endeavor.

At fourteen, then, my choice seemed clear-cut. I could go along with the crowd, or I could strike out on my own. If I took up the lance and shield of the genuine individu-

alist, then adolescent Beatlemania would not be the only casualty along the way. There was also church, my sweet, safe childhood church, where nobody had ever been anything but kind to me. Yet looked what they believed, this pack of courteous and conventional Lutherans from the great Midwest. Thanks to St. Augustine, not to mention their hero Martin Luther, they'd put most of their eggs in the basket of original sin. This meant (according to my confirmation teacher) that no matter how hard I tried to be good, how hard I worked, or how much I achieved in life, it didn't count. Only God could fix me. Not only was this insulting, it completely squashed any sort of initiative on my part.

No way, I decided. If I were to be genuinely free, Ayn-ishly free, I could no longer be saddled with any Transcendent Beings; nor could I be saddled with church, where people were so homogeneously Scandinavian you could hardly tell them apart. Week after week, it was the same old hymns, same old liturgy, same old prayers. It was a travesty against the individual, I thought with enormous disgust. Ayn would be appalled.

I stopped going to church and didn't return for nearly twenty years. Spiritual yearning returned first-vague restlessness, followed by desperate seeking. Eventually I found myself perched on rocks by flowing streams, trying to remember how to pray. I read, I pondered, I asked discreet questions of people who seemed to know something I didn't—but at no time did I even think about returning to the pews. I told myself that church was for people who didn't think, followers who needed to be led, and weak and domesticated devotees. I was not one of those; God had not made me that way. He and I had our own relationship, and church would only interfere with this.

Then one day, a friend invited me to a service, a Catholic service, though he wasn't Catholic. His wife was singing in the choir that day. We would sit with the kids in the front row and listen to the "Hallelujah Chorus."

At this point, I can only bring back impressions of that morning: the unforgiving feel of the wooden pew against my spine, the swirl of dust motes caught in a high slanting beam, the thud of kneelers hitting the floor. I do remember being in a state of hyper-alertness, like a concealed deer with hunters ranging close by. What was going to happen to me here? Despite the years of fumbling my lonely way toward God, I was not yet ready for this, whatever "this" was going to turn out to be.

Then the singers stood before us, a small and motley crew in robes that had not, it was clear, been individually tailored. They were going to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus," the fabulous chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, with only an upright piano to back them up? I shrank in embarrassed pity for them, getting in return a sharp rap in the vertebrae from the pew.

Then they began to sing, and what came out of them was joy, waves of it, and it knocked me flat. Suddenly, the candles, which had been lit all along, were blazing gold.

Huston: An Excerpt from "Holy Way"

Suddenly, the flowers at the foot of the altar burst into living color. I was a goner. This was an experience of God I'd never had before—not as a supercilious Lutheran delinquent, not as a middle-aged seeker by the side of trickling streams. This was (the term came out of nowhere) an experience of the Mystical Body; or at least that was my best guess about what had just happened—honestly, I didn't have a clue.

The service that day, and the equally ecstatic experiences of Mass that followed it during those first few years after my return to organized religion, set a fairly high standard. For a while, I couldn't get enough. Dailiness, however, was bound to take its toll. Finally the tug, the old Ayn-ish tug to do it my way, began to reassert itself in a life that had been in many ways transformed by the experience of church.

Ironically, the problem grew in proportion to the amount of time I spent practicing the disciplines. If I happened to be fasting, for example, I couldn't help but take smug note of how many buttermilk crullers were disappearing down the hatches of my fellow parishioners during hospitality hour after services. If I'd been trying hard to live frugally, I couldn't seem to keep from looking askance at the brand-spanking-new, paid-for-credit, gas-guzzling SUVs littering the church parking lot.

I noticed a certain peevishness setting in, an impatience with freeform homilies or a tremulous cantor. I was working so hard to be more focused; why couldn't they? Where was the sense of excellence, the pride in doing a job well? I found myself analyzing a visiting priest's drone: what, exactly, was he was trying to project with that? Ennui? Cynicism? The state of living death?

To put it simply, I had become a critic, hyper-conscious of slip-ups and missed marks on the part of the celebrant or choir. Worse, I became increasingly irritated by signs of slovenliness in the congregation, especially in those who slouched up for Eucharist in T-shirts with Harley Davidson symbols or Slayer death's-heads on the back. What was up with these people? Did they have no respect? More often than not, Mass in a parish church ended with me tense with frustration. The temptation, of course, was simply not to go, to wait until my next visit to the hermitage where I could refuel in a place with some of the—let's face it—class that seemed so woefully lacking in the average, garden-variety parish.

As my personal piques began to control my decision about whether or not I would worship communally that day, I felt a corresponding slippage in other parts of my life. My students, for example, seemed ruder, less prepared, far sleepier than in the past. My colleagues on campus had to be more dazed and disconnected; I could swear it. People were wilder drivers than they used to be. I couldn't even make a simple phone call anymore without running into six days' worth of instructions from a disembodied voice.

I was becoming a hopeless crank, old overnight and far before my time. My capacity for love was shrinking by the minute. Could this have anything to do, perhaps, with my reluctance to mingle with the *hoi polloi* in church each day?

Exasperated but also somewhat alarmed, I began ploughing around in the Scriptures in search of advice. Nothing much popped up (I firmly ignored the annoyingly persistent injunctions to love one another) until I came across Christ's long discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well. In the course of their conversation, he tells her facts about her life that nobody else knows—for example, that she's lived with five different men. She is appropriately impressed and also possibly annoyed at his insight—whichever it is, she begins a little argument about the proper place of worship, which has long been a controversial subject between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus replies that, "the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him" (John 4:23).

He was saying, in effect, "Don't get stuck in the physical details. Don't get trapped in a pharisaic ritualism." . . . Neither of these—mindless ritualizing or critical intellectualizing—are the point of going to church.

What is the point? I wondered. My shilly-shallying about organized worship did me no good—I could see that now. It was time for me to develop an adult perspective on this issue; time to let my poor mother off the hook. I needed to answer these questions once and for all. Why communal worship? Why can't we meet God just as well in the privacy of our own space? Why on earth must we saddle ourselves with the crowd?

. . . Dostoyevsky, speaking of the spiritual price we have paid for our precious modern autonomy, says of Christian ages past, "There must have been something stronger than stake and fire. . . . There must have been an idea stronger than any misery, famine, torture, plague, leprosy and all that hell, which mankind could not have endured without that idea, which bound men together, guided their hearts, and fructified the 'springs of life.'" Sometimes, in a crowd of Sunday morning devotees, I did see what he must have meant. People you'd normally find handling cash registers or fixing jammed drains or coaching soccer, instead shuffling reverently down the aisle to receive their bit of bread, their drop of holy wine.

Seen in this light, my ambivalent relationship with formal worship started to seem insignificant, in the same category, perhaps, as a hormonally caused mood swing—nothing you'd rely on if you needed to make a serious decision. It was maybe even something to be grown past, the way I'd finally grown past (at about age thirty-four) my stormy teenage rebellion—or, for that matter, the seductive philosophy of Ayn Rand.

. . . My youthful investment in hyper-individualism may have been, all along, the single biggest impediment to a simple life. The belief that my personality—that peculiar combination of habitual responses to things—was my most precious possession made

Huston: An Excerpt from "Holy Way"

it extremely difficult to do things differently. For example, if I stopped reacting with vociferous moral indignation whenever I heard about some flagrant corporate misdeed, I wouldn't be Paula anymore. If I stopped anxiously imagining the worst before I climbed on board an airplane, I wouldn't be me. This held true for my tendency to flatter others, my secret passion for macadamia nuts, and my self-consciousness in front of a camera. I'd always assumed that, quirks though they were, they were my own, and thus inherently valuable.

The notion that I could simply ignore my occasional restlessness during worship services, that I could stop listening to the effete proclamations of my internal critic, was brand-new. At the same time, it was entirely consistent with what I'd learned during my experiments with silence, solitude, fasting, chastity, and the other disciplines. I had already learned that habits could be changed, attitudes could be relinquished, and life could become fuller, richer, and simpler, but not without giving up the proclivities of the personality for something perhaps less obviously personal but quite a lot deeper.

I'd seen references to this deeper self in a number of different places: the Hindu Atman, Merton's true self, the Quaker Divine Spark, the Ground of Being, presence, essence, spirit, soul—the image of God within. According to most religious traditions and some schools of psychology, this deep self is universal—we all have it—though it is usually hidden from us under the complex layers of our personalities.

It is through this deep self, so mysterious and seemingly inaccessible, that we meet the Divine. Seen in this light, the spiritual journey becomes a long process of giving up the layers of the personal so as to uncover the hidden Self. In the process, of course, we become far less predictable to ourselves—and to others, who have come to think they “know” us and often prefer that we remain our old idiosyncratic but familiar selves.

Fr. Bruno Barnhart, a monk of New Camaldoli, says, “Awakening to the Self introduces a duality and tension between this deep center of a person and the practical center of the personality which is the ego.” In the New Testament, the “tension between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ represents . . .the contrast of two orientations of the whole person: toward the ‘old world’ which is centered in the unredeemed self . . .or toward the ‘new world’ which is participated [in] through self-giving in faith and love.”

This, I thought, might explain that first overwhelming experience in Mass the day of the “Hallelujah Chorus”—the sense of being momentarily caught up in the Mystical Body or corporate Christian being. This could only happen, of course, because I was so swept up in what was happening around me that for once I forgot to check in with headquarters. I had no time to draw back, assess, weigh, judge, or dismiss; no time to dig trenches, fortify the barricades, boil the oil. By the time I realized I was exposed and vulnerable, it was over: my naked and shivering little self had surrendered and, for a moment, I was seeing through brand new eyes.

I remembered the sudden flare of the candles, the swell of the music, the light falling from that high window, and I wondered if this had been what we were all after so very long ago when, twelve years old and filled with nameless yearning, we'd become Beatles devotees. Perhaps the urge to worship is so powerful that, denied, it comes bursting out anyway and carries us, tumbling and exhilarated, toward almost anything that seems larger and more magnificent than our own wee selves.

. . .The notorious existential loneliness of the contemporary individual cannot withstand such an experience. When "our minds are in harmony with our voices," as St. Benedict puts it, we are no longer thinking and behaving as isolated selves, but have found our place in the Whole. When we do, we see what is normally hidden: we see that we are not alone at all, but, in joining worshipfully together with our fellow human beings, we have become the very dwelling place of God. ☪