

The Trail is Not a Trail (Acts 1. 1-11)

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The Trail is Not a Trail

I drove down the freeway
And turned off at an exit
And went along a highway
Til it came to a sideroad
Drove up the sideroad
Til it turned to a dirt road
Full of bumps, and stopped.
Walked up a trail
But the trail got rough
And it faded away
Out in the open,
Everywhere to go.

*Gary Snyder*¹

The trail is not a trail, writes American poet Gary Snyder. My practice is no practice, says the Buddha. The way is a wayless way, maintains Meister Eckhart. Again and again, the world's spiritual teachers sound the paradox of religious life. We're taught there's a discipline to commit to, a path to follow, a form of life that gives shape, rhythm, and direction to orient us. And yet, there's a point at which the teacher departs, the practice ceases, the trail peters out and the practitioner, the disciple, the pilgrim is left ... well, where exactly?

It's not that those of us who are serious about the spiritual journey expect it will be plain sailing. I imagine we've all experienced at least some unexpected turns and bumpy terrain, times when the road seemed to end only for us to realise that it's

¹ Gary Snyder, *Left Out in the Rain* (North Point Press, 1986).

connected to a smaller, less travelled track, by way of a previously unremarked gate. Gary Snyder vividly evokes stages of this journey that are familiar to many of us. 'I drove down the freeway'. Often it all seems to begin so promisingly – a wide and flowing road laid out ahead of us by the certainties of Sunday School and our inherited tradition or by an experience of radical conversion, and off we set. At some point, there's usually some adjustment of our course – an off-ramp, a turning off at an exit, but essentially we're still heading along a highway, traffic flowing, edges clear.

Till the highway comes to a side-road. Now this is perhaps a little unexpected, but still navigable. On we go, says our poet, driving 'up the sideroad' till it turns to a dirt road'. By now things are getting a little sketchier ... the terrain more difficult, 'Full of bumps'. And if this is a metaphor for the spiritual life, maybe it represents the experience of finding obstacles to our continuance. Perhaps a certain language is going dead on us. We're seeing through some of our certainties, disillusioned perhaps by our religious community, old forms of prayer drying up. Ultimately, the point comes when it's impossible to keep travelling by the same means; we have to stop the car, we get out, yet still doggedly faithful to the way, we start walking up the trail. But Snyder is relentless: 'the trail got rough/And it faded away'. And now, at the last, the pilgrim finds herself in completely open space – no markers at all saying where to turn next, or how – no guidelines, 'Out in the open, Everywhere to go'.

And at this point, if it hasn't already done so, a question may press in. Has the whole trip been pointless? Has the sense of heading somewhere significant been an illusion all along? Has what I'd believed to be a way to life and a guarantee of purpose just exhausted itself – leaving me nowhere in particular? By the time we enter the second half of life, spiritually speaking, many are grappling with these questions – the certainties of first-half of life religion falling away behind us, the prospects of future conviction and direction seeming uncertain, to say the least. At least, that's one way of reading this deceptively simple poem.

There is, however, another reading possible. It kicks in at the final two lines. Up till then the journey is conceived in the same way; the narrowing road, the obstacles encountered, the necessary shift from driving to walking and another way of being. But on this second interpretation, at the end of the poem, when the trail fades away, isn't it possible that being 'out in the open' signifies, not the desolation of lost-ness but the spaciousness of discovering our belonging to the whole? And couldn't 'everywhere to go' signify, not the aimlessness of no orientation, but the realisation of infinite possibility?

In this vein, Martin Laird writes of the breakthrough beyond disciplined practice as the moment when 'all strategies of spiritual acquisition become silent and our practice, if it can be called that any more, is simply luminous vastness gazing on and gazed through by luminous vastness'.² On this account of the end of the journey, when the track fades away, it's because our practices have fallen away 'due to their own ripened readiness'.³ They have done their work of purification and simplification, and we have entered through the narrow gate into what St Paul describes as 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom. 8.21), the bright field of infinite presence.

And I wonder, which of these experiences of the journey resonates most for you? As the quotations I began with suggest, the opening into tracklessness, the movement beyond old ways and forms is a known feature of the spiritual life. But it seems that the lived experience of this trackless place can be very different. For some, it occurs as a dark night which can tend to complete disillusionment, the fear that the whole thing is a crock and the whole journey mistaken. For others, it occurs as a profound sense of arrival and of freedom to be. No longer are we 'on the way'; rather, like Jesus, we are become one with the way – always and everywhere in God. Here religious practice is not unmade by the unravelling of conviction, but transcended by the awareness of intimacy.

² Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.70.

³ Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.74.

So what's the difference here? Is it that some people just get lucky while others are destined for a long, perhaps unbroken dark night of the soul? Ruth Burrows, the Carmelite writer and spiritual guide, spoke of two kinds of mysticism – 'lights on' and 'lights off'.⁴ Martin Laird's words reflect the experience of 'lights on', the unshakeable sense (as he puts it) 'that the God we seek has already found us'.⁵ On the other hand, Therese of Lisieux and Mother Theresa, each of whom suffered to the end of their lives from a sense of the absence of God and lack of spiritual consolation, seem to represent 'lights off'. And in cases like these, what justifies calling the experience 'mystical' at all? Who says that spiritual dryness and loss of meaning are a kind of grace? What if they're a sign that we actually have lost our way? Or that there never was a way to begin with? That the trail, or what we thought was the trail, is not a trail.

Well, these are difficult and, for some, intensely painful questions. And there is no general response; each person's history, psychology and experience is unique, and what integrity, fidelity and commitment look like in each person's journey must be discerned in the living of it. Yet, it seems to me there is some wisdom we can draw from in our tradition.

'Such a fast
God, always before us and
leaving as we arrive'.

These are lines from R.S. Thomas's poem 'Pilgrimage'. When Jesus was killed, it must have seemed to his disciples as though his way and theirs had come to an end; yet miraculously, in the resurrection it had opened again. Jesus was returned to them, presenting himself 'alive to them' – according to the book of Acts – 'by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God'. From the disciples' perspective, perhaps, things seem back on

⁴ Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017).

⁵ Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.74.

track, Jesus giving them clear instructions about what to do next – ordering ‘them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father’.

Of course, there’s still much they don’t understand, much they’re not allowed to know. When they ask him if ‘this is the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’, Jesus replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority’. Nevertheless, they’re assured, something *will* happen for them: ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. But then suddenly, he’s gone again. ‘As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight’.

Received literally, this story of the Ascension is one of the strangest among many strange gospel events. But apprehended spiritually, it’s one of the most important. ‘One of Canadian novelist Anne Michaels’ characters says, “How do we know there’s a God? Because He keeps disappearing”’.⁶ Australian author and spiritual director, Philip Carter writes: ‘Christ is always just beyond our grasp, always going before us to Galilee. Since the time of the resurrection, when the angel’s message was “He is not here. He is risen” (Lk 24:5), we have clung to our idea of God, but as C. S. Lewis pointed out, our idea of God “has to be shattered time after time. [God] shatters it Himself. [God] is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of [God’s] presence?”’⁷

What does this mean? I think it means that the reality we name God, the truer Life that beckons us, is never ours to own or control or even fully conceive of. I think it means that the true God (as distinct from the false gods of our projections) is always at some level Other, inviting us deeper and making us simpler through the darkness of faith and the way of unknowing.

Even if our experience is ‘lights on’, that doesn’t mean we’re in fixed possession of God or of God’s peace and joy. Always the invitation is to journey on, to be drawn deeper into love, to risk letting go what we have and know for the sake

⁶ Cited in Philip Carter, unpublished manuscript 2024 (cited by permission), p.82.

⁷ Carter, unpublished manuscript 2024, p.82.

of fuller truth. In practical terms, this means returning humbly and faithfully to self-dispossessing prayer, not clinging to gifts bestowed but yielding ourselves every day anew. For even if the trail has become effectively imperceptible, and the practice has been transcended in the enjoyment of simple presence, that doesn't mean the pilgrimage itself is done. We're invited to expand our receptivity at ever more subtle levels of our being.

Conversely, if our experience is 'lights off', if we feel not so much beckoned deeper but simply bereft, then I suspect the invitation is the same. It's to keep faith with the way that brought us to here, remembering the desire for God and the love of truth that caused us to set out in the first place. It's true that what 'keeping faith' looks like might be different, at different times. Sometimes, if they have really become intolerable, it might mean daring to let go our practices, our old forms of gathering, and waiting humbly for a fresh leading to emerge, listening, attending to intimations within and without. Sometimes it might mean persisting with prayer as best we can, showing up in community, doing the next necessary thing. We may no longer be able to believe in the promise of power from on high or that anything will change. Yet we can keep faith with our yearning for integrity and our need of grace.

What happens next? Well, maybe 'it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority'. Maybe for some of us, in this life, the journey will not feel resolved. Even so, wherever the way has led us, our calling is to be true to where we find ourselves and willing to travel on: 'Out in the open, Everywhere to go'.