

Forms and Passing Beyond Them

For sometime now I wanted to write about a given topic yet was unable to pin down the subject matter to my satisfaction simply because it proved elusive. Even tacking on a name proved to be a bit of a problem. Besides, I was afraid that the enterprise might end up to be a waste of time. Despite this risk I decided to give it a shot and see what would come of it. Why not? At least the effort might dispel the uncertainty I had been experiencing. After all the desire to write had been hovering in the background without being fully revealed. Over against this I was aware of projects already completed and posted on this home page. Chances that somehow this elusive subject matter was related to some of the material posted there. If so, I stood a pretty good chance of clarifying my uncertainty. As for that home page, it comprises three categories: the first two are notations on several books of the Bible and studies on some early Fathers of the Church. The third category consists of assorted topics on aspects of ancient (Greek) philosophy which impinge upon Christianity, nature and for lack of a better word, life in general. While *lectio divina* properly speaking belongs to scripture, all other undertakings on the site were done in that spirit. It is precisely that practice I wish to continue making more attractive to a broader audience. So one way of getting into the hard to identify subject at hand...and that comprises this essay's title...a few remarks about *lectio divina* may be in order.

Often a person feels inadequate when dealing with topics related to spirituality (and *lectio divina* is no exception) which isn't surprising because everyone falls short in this department. The basic reason for the unease is that we're dealing with a completely unknown reality which at the same time has an inescapable grip on us. We may not be able to identify the point of contact but surely feel it to be present. While this is an important matter it isn't the point at issue here, so let's leave it aside for future consideration. As for spirituality, the Christian variety has an incredibly wide amount of expressions which had developed over the past two millennia, so we don't lack for resources. Even with such an abundance out there ready for the taking, a lot of people are afflicted with a nagging inadequacy which can hinder them from inquiring further. Close examination reveals that while yes, man is insignificant before God, our feelings about this indigence can be taken too far and cause unnecessary trouble. Putting it this way shows that we are not at the center of reality.

As for how to approach this, it helps to first accept not knowing where to begin looking, let alone how to begin. One way of addressing this dilemma is open to everyone, simple yet not sufficiently addressed. Let's call it our inability to read slowly...very slowly...minus the goal of getting through a given text. Reading may not sound like the place to look for a solution to one of life's biggest problems, but it's a chief means by which we obtain

information about the world. If you're illiterate, you're at a disadvantage¹. The twofold challenge of not knowing where and how to begin reading slowly is easier said than done, but if you exert yourself, the reward is very great. Its value is all the more precious because the ultra-slow approach to reading which *lectio divina* requires is almost unheard of today. You get insights that are unobtainable by any other means. In fact, it may even qualify as a discipline all its own even though it doesn't qualify as a marketable product (yet).

So before getting into the matter at hand this observation about *lectio* is helpful because it impinges upon how we approach our religious heritage. If you can get a handle on slowing down your mind (and that manifests itself as reading slowly), you're in a good position to do *lectio divina*. Besides, the double conundrum of not knowing where to begin and how to begin is resolved on its own once you decide to go down this path. The desire to speed up our reading will continue to plague us, but it is diminished considerably provided we show constant diligence. We can take courage from those who have been at it a long time. They continue to complain of the temptation to speed up their reading in order to "get through" the material which reveals something of how human nature operates, namely, our inbred impatience.

The practice of *lectio divina* has an effect on people different from two general approaches that have evolved over the years (actually centuries), theology and devotion. The former usually falls under the province of the clergy and higher institutions of learning and the latter is associated lay folk. While that has been current for a long time and despite the fact that both have been blended successfully in many instances, it appears that the two have become wanting. This is difficult to pin down for a number of reasons. It might be because the culture has become so secular and religion so absent that manifestations of things religious couched in traditional ways stand in contrast all the more sharply. At the same time the longing people have for genuine spirituality has never been stronger. They want it but not in these forms which raises a lot of issues about picking and choosing as well as shunning external authority. This shouldn't be a negative appraisal of both practices which have made positive contributions to the church. So into this mix let's insert the practice of *lectio divina* which seems to operate independently yet parallel to both. First we must dispel the notion that *lectio* is a halfway house between theology and devotion. In other words, it's a practice beneficial for a person interested in things divine while not

¹Illiteracy can be remedied by having someone read to you or listen to a recording of one kind or another. In ages past most monks had been illiterate and were read to many times in the course of a given day such as at the Office, Mass, refectory and in private. If you take a look at St. Benedict's **Rule**, you'll be surprised at the central role of reading for those who are both literate and illiterate.

intellectually qualified to do theology. It was considered a poor man's way of doing theology and explored little outside monastic circles. Because *lectio* is associated with monasticism, supposedly monks fall into this category as official "halfway" representatives, neither scholars nor devout lay persons but somewhere in between. Anything coming from *lectio* is not terribly important, mostly for private consumption. Thus it leans more towards devotional practice.

Yet if we make the two ideas of reading very slowly and *lectio divina* pretty much interchangeable, they can become a single tool enabling us to gain new insights into how we approach our Christian faith. In an age where speed is a premium ('the faster the better'), taking the opposite stance is of primary importance. First, *lectio* is kind of counter-cultural and second, it opens new levels of understanding that largely have gone undetected, even ignored. The best part is that it appeals to readers in a way that's neither scholarly nor devotional while allowing for the expression of both (not that reading quickly is synonymous with the two traditional approaches). In other words, anyone can join in on doing *lectio divina*. So this appeal helps counter that sense of inadequacy often associated with spirituality which is quite normal.

Stressing this idea of super-slow reading is important in another way insofar as it helps us deal with one of the greatest complaints out there regarding things divine, the elusiveness of God's presence. The Bible is full of references to the divine majesty, of the awesomeness of God and our inability to relate to him. This is one of the first facts you learn in Sunday school and can nag at you for years. It's right up there with doubts about the existence of God. Once you take this stance, you can shelf God and focus on external practices without much reference to him while remaining a Christian, at least in name and in reputation. We struggle with this elusiveness in the classic spiritual alternation between God's presence and his absence. Theology and devotion are full of it...so much that to conceive of the spiritual life otherwise doesn't seem possible. Apparently any absence of talk about "suffering" is suspect. If you focus upon trials and tribulations, you're on the right track. In other words, the whole view of spirituality has become skewered and requires a lot...and I mean a lot...of patient reconsideration.

Yet so much talk about spirituality centers around this issue which happens to be punctuated by an occasional brush with the divine. Why this is so will be spelled out a bit later. To question the role of suffering sounds awkward, even out of place, as if anyone has the presumption to do so. Yet the association of suffering with spirituality is so inbred and has had some role in undercutting our ability to talk about things divine. We could put this in another way. The customary language and practices have fallen out of favor

with nothing adequate to replace them. People just don't relate to them which doesn't mean they don't care. Or we could put it another way. People are turned off by ready-made answers which preclude discussion and inquiry. This challenge prompts us to search for something rooted way back within the Judeo-Christian tradition yet at the same time contemporary while avoiding the two-fold division of theology and devotion. We're looking for a congruence which takes into consideration a long tradition without falling into some of the terminology and ways of thinking about that tradition that seem so automatic. "Automatic" because some spiritual seekers get a packaged response when posing questions posed about problems they encounter which reveals the ignorance of the person eager to give answers. Our search is for something that fits. We know when it fits because it comes from outside ourselves. Everyone knows what that means and may be designated as applied spirituality. Also when you feel something that fits it's equivalent to the process of discernment or more accurately, its fruits.

In light of what was just said it seems that reading slowly/*lectio divina* (for our purposes both are interchangeable) is something a lot of people are comfortable with. It doesn't require explanation meaning that anyone can use this approach right off the bat with little or no instruction. Stop and reflect on this for a minute. Savor the fact that we have in our hands one of the most desirable tools for personal transformation through Scripture, one with which God is eager to help us. It requires no discipline commonly perceived which doesn't diminish the requisite single-mindedness we must bring to bear upon super-slow reading. At the same time considerable focus is demanded of which all forms of discipline are a mirror. For once attention to *lectio divina* has an appealing ring to it minus that worn-out emphasis on suffering just noted. Every time we hear of the practice of *lectio* we're eager to get right at it. Before long we discover that we're disciplining ourselves without barely noticing it.

The slowing down of one's attention while doing *lectio divina* has broader positive implications than first imagined and becomes evident once we've had even a slight brush with it. This can be put in another way. When we slow down for *lectio*, a braking action comes into play which means we're adapting gradually to an unfamiliar practice. Like any unused muscle, this one has to be trained to get in shape. Let the practice go, and it atrophies. Note that we talking about slowing down, not coming to a complete stop. This distinction is crucial. If we opted for the latter, we'd run the risk of committing a kind of spiritual suicide. We'd end up getting splattered as if we ran suddenly in front of a train. Splattering is splattering...there are no lesser degrees of it. Making this mistake perhaps is one of the most common out there. People attempt to stop themselves from functioning on the mental level and before they get splattered. Fortunately for them they suffer discouragement and proceed no further. I say "fortunately" because their

confusion over lack of visible progress appears a setback, but it precludes them from getting into real trouble.

What's special about the slow reading process of *lectio divina* compared with other forms of spiritual practice is that you don't fall into the trap of constantly gauging yourself, of making versus not making progress. The subject of your attention...what you're reading...has been reduced to a minimum, let's say one word or phrase, not more, which is in accord with the traditional approach. This word or phrase assumes a reality more akin to the Greek notion of *logos* (i.e., in imitation of Jesus the *Logos*) which is more an expression that's ongoing. This saves *lectio* from being just another exercise in concentration or focus. The *logos* onto which you've directed attention saves your practice from the traditional subject-object relationship and hence from making a dichotomy. The best part is that anyone can do it without delay and verify his results when consulting other people. That makes the *logos* at hand tie in nicely with the one of *marturion* or witness. Experience is corroborated not just with one or two persons but with a community of persons. Without going overboard, we can throw in another term, *koinonia* or communion which rests upon a common, unified interpretation of the *logos* at hand.

So this newly realized *logos* or expression we've hit upon is, if we may put it so, more life-giving than many spiritual practices, suitable for the educated and uneducated. No longer does it fit into our common understanding as a word, almost a barrier to jump over as quickly as possible to reach the next one and so forth. Even when we are at the threshold of doing our *lectio* and just gazing at the text before us the text begins to change into a *logos*. This is especially true when reading Hebrew where the letters...words...are themselves mini-icons. By the way, this looking is a kind of gazing not unlike the initial contact between two lovers. You're just hanging there, kind of suspended, waiting to see what happens next. This is a reaching out which is automatic as anyone who engages in the practice knows well. Some may invoke God, the Virgin Mary or a favorite saint to dispel this feeling of awkwardness. Once that's accomplished, you feel more comfortable to proceed.

Because we've entered a new world, one where we're compelled (and delightfully so) to slow down, new opportunities present themselves. The text which previously we've taken as words now becomes a *logos* of one or two words which deepen over time until we get a larger picture of The Word or *Logos*, Jesus Christ. After a while, he comes into greater focus, a delightful surprise awaiting us. But getting there word-by-word, *logos-by-logos*, is not unlike looking into a microscope and seeing the same reality but at deeper levels. This continues the further you dig, and like physics, doesn't seem to have an end. On the other hand, you do reach a certain stage when the

familiar forms about you lose shape and dissolve. Forms as we're accustomed to perceive them dissolve, hence the reason for this essay's title. Of course, we can't stay at this level but must return to our normal one. If you were to ask a person who just "returned," chances are he'd talk about the great peace and joy experienced, little more. That's a nice witness but doesn't describe the "place" from which he had just arrived. We tend to leave it at that without exploring this land more, perhaps afraid that something within us will balk at the prospect of taking a risk. It's not unlike the supposed experience people have when they encounter the holy. They know they've hit upon a reality very different from their normal experience and automatically back off in reverential fear.

It appears that the real issue which causes us fear is losing form...not just our own and all that's makes us us but a lack of ignorance as to what we've hit upon. Almost all spiritual authors would speak of a similar encounter. At this point they're fond of throwing out a whole bunch of caveats that we cannot go further. Considerable purification is required before we even consider this. Listening to some of them play this tune is enough to discourage anyone. They have couched the whole enterprise in language that to many seems archaic. That's fine to a certain extent, but the situation gets hairy when they put this in formulaic-speak without taking it further. Should we persevere in our inquiry or more accurately, continue with our discipline² (and that is put in terms of transforming a text into a *logos*) we can break through the rough spots that are barriers from further inquiry. These spots are indeed rough—neither harsh nor troublesome enough to cause real pain—but sufficiently “bumpy” as to cause discouragement. And why not? It's natural to think we've come across a territory that's alien and in essence comprises a dead end. Here a certain weightiness comes upon us, pressing out all our thoughts and imaging to a degree that our faculties no longer find the strength to continue doing what they normally do. And that consists in continuously throwing out images, thoughts and emotions which we identify as life. Without a doubt this “life” is more a spewing forth as from the mouth of a sewer. Everyone who has experienced it claims it comes not from them but from other source. Whether it's from the sub or unconscious isn't clear, but that's not the issue. We should be grateful, neither ashamed nor embarrassed, for this expulsion no matter how long it takes, for we're cleansing ourselves.

Can we draw any conclusions from this unsettled state of affairs? The answer is simple, really. Instinctively we prefer form...any form...over its

²The traditional monastic word *ascesis* may be of help here. It involves discipline and various penitential practices, but we can take it in the original sense. That is to say, *ascesis* derives from a verbal root meaning to fashion by art, to adorn, to decorate. It also applies to training as in the physical variety which athletes love to do without considering it a burden.

opposite. Due to our ignorance we designate the opposite as formless and chaotic and therefore are terrified of it. The forms of interest here aren't static, hanging around out there like the popular conception of Plato's forms which have cast a strong spell over our collective imagination. If they were undesirable, we wouldn't place such premium on them. Should we look more closely, we'd find that the forms we prefer...all without exception...turn out to be divorced from reality. Not that they are inherently bad, but they govern our very lives without our knowing it. What we get is a whole lot of turmoil as anyone can see in our inability to quiet ourselves down because we live, breathe and think in terms of forms. Because this phenomenon accompanies us as a companion (albeit unwanted), we need to take a good look at why this is so. That means coming face to face with those rough spots which forms beget in us, a task seemingly next to impossible, even not grounded in reality. However, anyone who has had exposure to *lectio divina* and the fruit it produces of slowing down one's mind has an inkling of this unreality.

For proof that *lectio* actually works we can take a cue from elderly persons in our midst. They've experienced plenty of successes and failures and in later life have acquired a certain wisdom without knowing it. It was as though this wisdom had crept up on them from behind, taking them unaware. These folks don't have to move about much as they had when younger. Easily they can project themselves to a far off place such as a remote Pacific island they heard of but never had visited while remaining perfectly content without budging an inch. They remain stationary on one level yet are constantly traveling on another. Most elders don't bother asking questions about this gift but are content to enjoy it as long as possible. Another aspect of this gift is their readiness to offer stories from their past, being detached from what they've experienced whether good or bad. If you pay attention, you can see that these elderly folks have contended with forms of every variety imaginable until out of the clear blue something clicks. They've come to the conclusion that it isn't worth expending energy on either the good or the bad but have learned take both as pretty much the same. While admirable, that's as far as they get without pressing further. Too bad, since they've laid the ground work but haven't built upon it. So when it comes time to die, they just pass off the scene. So if this wisdom we could define as detachment from forms comes naturally, what would happen if we apply ourselves now when we're younger? Will we be able to move behind this first stage, admirable as it is? To find out you have to do *lectio divina*, stick with it and see the results.

What stands out concerning these living treasures among us is that it has taken a lifetime to achieve the wisdom we traditionally ascribe to them. The arduous journey of getting there is so ingrained in our culture and taken as a fact of life that wisdom is beyond our reach until it's almost too late. By then we'll have too few years to apply it. So all the decades from early adulthood

to retirement run the risk of being perceived as wasted. They aren't thrown away, of course, but looking back from old age they are seen as essentially vain. Certainly not an encouraging prospect. Then you think back on the religious development of such persons during those long years up to and including old age. We've hit upon an embarrassing sore spot because there appears little or no advancement starting from childhood. This doesn't detract, of course, from both the wisdom and maturity acquired throughout a long life. Indeed, the religious dimension remains pretty much flat throughout. You could discern less than significant growth if it were possible to interview the same person as a child and as advanced in age. This fact really says a lot about religion as it ties into society and culture. So when you get right down to the heart of the matter, an infinite variety of forms impinge upon us. There appears no similarity between their loosening (at old age, for example) and the impact of religion upon a person. The latter is just one form among all the others, static and constant from youth. That's part of the reason why we see elderly people endowed with a certain wisdom yet minus reflection as to its origins. They pass of the scene with some hope, but that's about all.

Let's say you don't fall under the category of senior citizen but are somewhere between an adolescent and middle age though you are inexorably moving toward old age. You see life passing by (almost too common an experience to mention) and wish either to capture it or slow it down. Many of us articulate this elusiveness as participating in a dream which arises from perception of the rapid succession of events which we feel underpins a more encompassing reality. If we could tap into that reality, we would have it made. Yet doubt about this reality persists despite the fact that we can intuit it indirectly, from the corner of our eye, if you will. Universal dissatisfaction with the limitations of our present life testifies to this overwhelming desire for resolution. It is indicative of our limited resources of being unable to attribute to it a name and description. More specifically, our intuition tells us we should place our resources somewhere profitable which largely has been invested elsewhere. Earlier generations were more certain how to handle this matter which to us is both admirable and at the same time mechanical, almost unreflective. Automatically they invested their energy in hope of a divine recompense and so did their fathers...all the way back to God only knows when. While many of us don't know where to lay our heads, they certainly did. For them, authority was key. However, we may not be able to follow them which means the issue doesn't go away.³

³Interestingly, most monks who have attained old age have the opposite experience. Like everyone else they feel life rushing by (thank God it's not the opposite). However, they don't have regrets even for their failures. This can be traced in large part to their life-long dedication to *lectio divina*. Right from the day they entered to the present they had been exposed to *lectio* as a slowing down of

Not far removed from the experience of elderly people is one more accessible to us, but it comes with a cost. By that I mean humiliations, more specifically, our recollection of them which translates into how they govern our lives. We get brought down low by other people in a public venue, an experience that melts us away. Then the experience passes, and we're stuck with memories that don't pass as quickly as we wish. Most people have passed on but not so in our minds. Some time may pass, even years, when someone brings up our humiliation as though it had happened yesterday. At once we're faced with the same experience, fresh as could be. This long-term projection into the future does have a positive side, provided we recognize it. The memories foster...don't hinder...being on the other side of thoughts and emotions, if you will, the two agents responsible for cranking out ideas and images which keep us in a prison of our own making. The precise mechanism of this isn't clear; perhaps it's beyond our understanding, yet we can intuit whether or not such a reality exists. And the proof is rooted in the slowing down of our lives as through the practice of *lectio divina*. Memories of humiliations may never leave us nor people may never allow them to depart, but no longer are we imprisoned in their forms.

Most people have an uneasy truce with life which is resolved in part when they attain that wisdom associated with the latter years of life even though it is incomplete. Before retirement they're too busy and can feel entrapped with no options which gives rise to a sense of incompleteness. Even some old folks, while grateful for their wisdom, wish they had acquired it earlier in life when they had dim glimpses of acquiring it. Now at the end of life they're compensated for their years of struggle, but their wisdom is tinged with regrets, even major ones, that can dull the shine on their gift. If, for example, you question an older person wherein lay the problem, he would respond essentially that he had placed too much emphasis upon form. Those wouldn't be the first words out of his mouth, of course, but they lay at the heart of his regret. The concrete manifestations he had experienced ranged from good to bad and everything in between. However, that isn't the issue. An elderly person doesn't care so much for adjectives as opposed to substance. That substance consists of an elusive, mysterious force not easily pinned down by forms which for all practical purposes is continuous and underpins all reality. Along with this goes the realization that earlier he had placed reliance upon his intellectual faculties, fine in themselves, but they do not comprise the whole picture. The reason? They lend themselves more readily to details while reality is passing you by. Such details take up the bulk of one's life which is followed by the much shorter span of old age (given advances in medicine, this, of course, can be subject to debate).

one's spirit mind and even body. Such is their contentment which lay visitors admire so much.

Whether young, middle age or old, everyone experiences a release of energy. Its source is always present throughout all life's ups and downs, but we give little attention to it. The word "energy" has certain connotations ranging from physics to New Age...a quasi-spiritual entity...so I use it with some hesitation while preferring the Greek *energia*, literally as a working-in. The general idea is that as we go through life we float on a surface not separate from it but rooted in a reality which gives life and form from beneath, as it were, to what's above or where we live and move about. Perhaps this image contributes to the common perception that "time (and hence life) flies" as well as that we pass through life in a dream-like state. Such universal wisdom is taken for granted, nothing more, and so we advance rather blindly to the relative wisdom of old and finally to death.

What if we could wean ourselves away from these forms? Despite their infinite variety, they boil down to an overall blandness which derives from their repetitive nature. That's the question, really, on the minds of most people even if they don't articulate as such. Our unreflective-ness in the matter is both appalling while at the same time understandable, leaving us in a situation as how to proceed. It's a condition that has become a natural state of affairs not long after our birth, if you will, something into which it seems we had been born. Since everyone is in the same boat, it's difficult to get an objective point of view on the whole process. Until we put to rest this vague yet persistent issue we continue with a sense of going nowhere which is why the practice of *lectio divina* is a handy remedy. Because the essence of *lectio* consists of reading in a super-slow manner, the insights gained from it are quite different and more precious than from any other source. On one hand *lectio* is easy to put into practice yet on the other, quite difficult. Expanding on this practice, we could say that by doing *lectio* a person will reach a state more quickly where he can envision an alternative to expending himself in an endless array of forms. Super-slow reading and the life style that can result has the potential of doing away with the often felt perception of forms advancing continuously before our eyes. That's why we claim that life passes us dream-like and which such rapidity, increasing as we get older.

The slow reading demanded by *lectio divina* which I've expanded into a practice more inclusive than reading a sacred text discloses an underlying problem that affects us all. That consists of the tension between two desires: to live at a leisurely pace (the one for which we seem to have been born and is our heritage) versus the one where we wish to get as much done as possible before we die. The former may be viewed as vertical and the latter as horizontal. We get a clear insight into the vanity of the latter when we're engaged in the former or when, if you will, we're in a *lectio* mode. So this vertical type of reading...one that favors transcendence...allows us to step back from our natural tendency of slipping into giving birth to forms, an

endless process ending only in death. As already noted, that is relieved beforehand with the partial wisdom of old age.

So if we come to the conclusion that living on the form-al level is our natural state of affairs, why does it seem to cause so many problems? This insight runs the risk of falling into the temptation of attributing some kind of defect or malign force at work, far from the truth. The problem lies in our exclusivity of attachment to a given form(s) to the neglect of another or better, our failure to be aware of this attachment except indirectly as through weariness with life. While the practice of *lectio divina* proposed here is one answer, it isn't the by all and end all of the root cause of what ails us. However it's rooted in tradition and thus worth serious consideration.

Society has spend considerable energy divesting itself of warlike behavior and codes of living to produce a more congenial environment. The impetus doesn't come for any desire for benevolence or love of one's fellow man but out of economic development. Trading goods was a way to create a stable relationship between peoples. Granted, societies still engaged in wars, but at least they began the drift away from constant, local strife dating all the way back to Home (the **Iliad** and **Odyssey**) to a desire to stabilize societies in order to increase better trade relations. This went along fine until World War I when the whole package fell apart, and no one has been able to be put together since. Still, people wish to stabilize their lives in order to flourish first as individual, secondly as families and finally as (local) groups. All this is very natural and desirable. Yet the quest for stability has an agenda which you don't pick up at first glance which turns out to be stifling. Everyone gets along fine while exchanging goods, etc., but that's about it, even when the process becomes quite complex. All sorts of rules are in place to ensure that people follow the rules of good, polite behavior which sounds terrific for avoiding conflict. However, living in that environment eventually can become boring and meaningless and frowns on anything beyond economic flourishing. Activities associated with religion are especially suspect. They are made out to look foolish since they represent a reaching beyond the parameters laid down by society. If you look at this in terms of forms as discussed here, society treats the forms it had developed as ironclad constraints for keeping people in line. The forms of religion are threatening since they tended to keep people in line as well with their own constraints. They were even more ironclad because hell and eternal punishment were thrown into the mix.

Delving into these matters is beyond the scope of the essay at hand, but they demonstrate how the form-al world about us has become crystalized ('set in its ways' is a common way of putting it). Again, the slow reading associated with *lectio divina* is one readily accessible option to remedy the situation. So let's examine the result, if you will, of what it means to read

slowly as it takes hold of our lives. Behind the first insight which is an overall feeling of peace comes a reaching-beyond of the conventional bounds of forms as discussed here. And these forms are infinite in number, comprising as they do our very lives. So as we ride along with their ebb and flow on a daily basis being kept busy, often pleasantly so, until the slowing down initiated by the practice of *lectio divina* takes root. To put it bluntly and right to the point, *lectio* induces us to suspend our thoughts and emotions. When they arise as they're bound to, returning to the word-as-*logos* at hand in the practice of *lectio* counters this rise and lets it go. Thus the ebb and flow of thoughts never can be eliminated nor is it advisable to advocate this. If you set out with their elimination as a goal, suicide would become a real possibility.

Thus we end up by making a truce of sorts. We can step outside the bounds of natural human flourishing which levels out society ('flatten' may be more accurate) but is not hostile to it. If we did, society would penalize our attempts of stepping beyond the bounds. The precise nature of these violations may not be clear but surely they exist and can be more subtle than outright strictures. Any lack of conformity, while not harmful in itself, is perceived as suspicious, a source of potential conflict. Most likely something to this effect will happen when we follow through with our practice of *lectio divina*, the effects of slow reading, so we might as well resign ourselves to the fact. Still, society would have a hard time pursuing something it can't comprehend and most likely take aim at organized religion instead.

The new realm we've brushed up against is immune to description but can be intuited, a kind of indirect glance, which produces that overall sense of peace and well being. Initial contact is like taking up position at a border where two different types of territory meet. Being there gives you a sense of where you live and where you don't, a rather mysterious space.⁴ At this point where the two rub up against each other a person will experience pressure from both sides: on the one hand from the forms ready and eager to emerge and from the background or source from which they do this emerging. A fascinating "place" to be, really, because it invites a passing over the border from form into that which (for lack of a better word) is formless. The pressure produced by this contact of territories is close to life itself and thus one way of describing it. The vital energy comprising forms can be intuited as raw, vital energy which pushes us to other side of forms, if you could put it in spacial terms.

⁴Consider Moses whom the Lord prohibited from entering Canaan after forty years of governing the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness. He ascended Mount Nebo from which the Lord showed him "all the land" [Dt 34.2]. We might take this as punishment but to Moses it was sufficient to see what the Lord had promised. He was standing on Nebo rubbing up against the promised land, as it were, which was sufficient for him.

So when we perceive this vital pressure directly we can't help but become immobilized. There's no other way to describe it. The ensuing immobilization throws into a new light the reality of free will...what exactly is it? In this state which *lectio divina* seems to advocate, freedom takes on a wholly different meaning. We discover (that is, we find out for ourselves, not through books or hearsay) that a practical expression of freedom consists in conforming as rigorously as possible to the vicissitudes of the external world, robot-like, if you will. If we were to speak like this on the side of forms, the innate preference people have for them would make our words sound more than absurd. Coupled with this immobilization is an innate revulsion and fear because as in the physical world it signals the cessation of life. To get this right without introducing crazy ideas requires of us sound theoretical understanding so we don't dive into it as into an empty pool. Instead, we dip in discreetly...at intervals here and there, short and sweet...without overdoing it. If our goal were to abide full time within this immobilization by a deliberate act of the will, we might as well go out and commit suicide. That brings up an wholly different subject, very interesting, but not of concern at the moment. On the other hand, the short and sweet gestures of immobilization are enough for the moment. Should our need for them increase, no problem. Automatically and robot-like we'll know what to do based upon our sound theoretical inquiry. After we've gotten that, we can go out and "prove" it as by doing our *lectio divina*.

All this might sound a bit far out. That's why we require constant appeal to experience which proves it otherwise. After we've gotten into the swing of things, of being more at ease about the alteration between forms and what is in-formal (i.e., immobilization of our thoughts and emotions), we become aware of a larger force at work. Truly it is continental in scope compared with the minor adjustments here and there we've been accustomed to doing. The distinction between the two is huge...monumental...yet unfortunately has gone undetected for many people. We had considered natural the formal way of life or our preference for forms of all shapes and sizes. We were born this way, lived in agreement with the forms presented to us out there without questioning them and went about our business accordingly. This mode of life has something "horizontal" about it and affects the way we live and think with little or no reflection. Of course, we're not using our brains to deal with everyday stuff as well as highly technical and sophisticated matters. The issue is that we're unaware of the linear quality of forms, that they move along from point A to point B and so forth. It all turns out to be very flat and unexciting, an observation that's bound to rouse both suspicion and anger, quite understandable. Here is the template to the monotonous evenness which marks our society, the rules and strictures designed to keep us within certain bounds. If we live and move within these parameters, we're fine. Still, we can't help but reflect privately that living this way is

dreamlike and transitory which means we have to deal with the various symptoms it produces. All in all a dreary and boring prospect. The commonplace wisdom for them represents band-aid remedies with an occasional appeal to faith and so forth but nothing more. Ecclesiastes tries coming to grips with this with his famous “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” That has become pretty much the standard of dealing with life down to the present.

Distinct from the just noted “horizontal” mode of life where most of us live is one with a “vertical” axis. Once we recognize it we start going against the grain of the natural (formal) one. To those of us living on the horizontal plane, even to conceive of the vertical one is like wanting to go out and step off a cliff, literally. Yet repeated exposures to the in-formal realm as through *lectio divina* say no, the cliff does not exist. It only looks that way. We haven’t familiarized ourselves enough with the reality we’ve encountered, the one that produces immobilization, hence we view it as disastrous. Yet once we’ve come to understand this unique situation and have accepted the cold, rigid embrace it offers, we find things aren’t as disastrous as anticipated. Despite the coldness of this embrace, the peace and serenity we receive demands a switch in the order of things. Rather, we come to the realization that already the switch has been done for us; all we have to do is comply.

Somewhere below the radar of our awareness a profound switch has taken place, thanks to the cold embrace of immobilization. The new order we’ve become aware of—it was always present; we had been ignorant of it—may be designated as normal. We call it such because it becomes a norm...a path...by which we live which differs from anything belonging to the natural order. The latter is unreflective; it came into existence that way and will always remain so. A norm is handed down from above as a gift, not fabricated, which is why the cold embrace of immobilization offers peace and serenity, not cries of anguish. Never could these come from our own resources. The normal order requires work in order to bring it into existence but a work unlike the familiar laborious effort that comes to mind. And that work consists of disposing ourselves to being immobilized and letting things go from there. Easy to do, but another thing to sustain. A more accurate way of putting this is not so difficult to sustain but more difficult putting up with alternations, life’s ups and downs. These gain in frequency and intensity as we move from the formal to the in-formal plane and *visa versa*...many times in the course of just one day. Nevertheless, we know we’re onto something which gives reason to persevere. Perhaps this might be the more technical definition of hope or certainly isn’t far from it.

We might be tempted to ask what happens to us on the in-formal plane when it begins to smooth out as through the practice of *lectio divina*. The question is meaningless because it implies sequence, of one event (something that has

happened) which gives birth to another and so on down the line, indefinitely. Things don't work this way on the in-formal plane. We don't turn into supermen, saints or the like. While such speculation is a bit simplistic, it contains some truth because it's asked on the plane of form which lacks correspondence on the plane of the in-formal. Instead of these speculations the reality turns out to be quite different. Here two plus two doesn't equal four. The in-formal plane (and now more clearly perceived as the normal one) operates on a different time table, if you will, and has very different priorities. So we can't expect any external changes which means that the natural realm offers a perfect disguise for the normal one. A person can operate on the in-formal plane all day long without anyone taking notice. In the real world this doesn't mean one is definitively ensconced there but is earnest in his practice of making gestures, albeit short and sweet, in favor of the in-formal plane over the formal one. For him the biggest challenge is patience, of putting up with the continuous failures to make the final leap over to the in-formal plane. This may be put better as continuing along this line until he realizes there's no difference between the two. Failure to grasp this is perhaps why literature in Christian spirituality speaks about not being able to enjoy heaven on earth except by glimpses here and there. This mirrors the experience of many people throughout the ages, but the language in which it's couched sometimes is less than to be desired.

Does a person who works inwardly all day long like this and unknown to the world have any value? Certainly there is none visible to the eye. Like the temptation to ask what happens on the in-formal plane, this one is unfair because it's posited from the side of the form-al plane. Still, the question is bound to arise and be on the mind of a person engaged in those short but sweet gestures of transcendence. Only one with sufficient experience can judge if the practice is worth the effort. Let's look at it concretely, that is, when you get to old age. You're pretty much limited in your movement and enjoyment of faculties which all the while are deteriorating. That means you spend more of your time sitting around with nothing to do. Ideally speaking this should be the time for intense practice of moving toward the in-formal plane with a view towards taking up residence there. But as with elderly people and their acquired wisdom, usually it goes only so far. An extra push is required which you won't get from society, even from religion, but from your own inner resources. If you've been doing a practice like *lectio divina* a good portion of your life, you're more disposed to take the extra step. That seems to be why monks living in the infirmary are joyful despite the afflictions of old age common to everyone. They've spend a lifetime doing *lectio* and now are reaping its fruits...and they know it which is simply terrific. An added benefit is that younger monks see them and know that if they're faithful they too will end up this way. We all get old, so why not do it as best as we can?

Looking back by way of conclusion, I had some hesitation using the term “form” in the essay’s title, let alone the title in general. Also I’m aware of not giving due examination to the larger Western philosophical and theological traditions regarding this matter. Yet an almost mysterious, hard to define pull⁵ wouldn’t go away which eventually made me want to explore the topic. That pull was trying to communicate that we live on the edge of a reality not fully explored but rendered available to us in part through the practice of *lectio divina*. Obviously this enterprise is elusive, but people who’ve made *lectio divina* a way of life have given witness to it chiefly by the joy in their lives. You don’t hear them talking about moving from the formal to the informal plane or of *lectio* as a suspension of one’s mental and emotional faculties. That I’ve inserted into their testimony, as it were, and with the desire of getting more insight into how our mental and emotional lives assume forms. And this is done chiefly through ideas, images and the whole constellation of world views that spring from them. Perhaps all this bucks up against some cosmic limit. Nevertheless, we all have a desire to get beyond our formal-al lives is one way or another which is another way of speaking about our innate desire for transcendence.

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3 December 2013

⁵An observation about this so-called pull. I wrote this article in late autumn when the sun sets early, casting long shadows from the southwest to the northeast. Shadows stretch out this time of year and tend to linger much longer. In the meanwhile you have the setting sun which illumines any building between it and to the east of your position. If this building is on a hill by itself it stands out all the more, a bit forlornly yet comforted by the sun’s rays. I’d say the pull at hand is not unlike this. It hangs out there by itself all the while having an irresistible attraction towards the sun. All in all, a mysterious process that continues to fascinate on a level that surely isn’t of the mind nor of the emotions but something else, quite undefinable.