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Mystery

Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.⁶

Problems are challenges to our cleverness, ingenuity, endurance and skills. Problems have solutions, at least in principle. If we are clever enough, work hard enough and have the right tools, problems give way to solutions. Solutions, in turn, bring closure and closure brings a sense of power, and power brings a sense of control. All of which is entirely appropriate if we are dealing with machines or merely functional issues.

Our daily experience, however, reminds us repeatedly that there is no solution to life as such. Life is much more than a problem or even a series of problems. It is that “more than” that calls for serious attention. There is always more to discover, more to deal with, more to enjoy, more to suffer, more to live, and more to wonder about. Every moment contains the rider: “There is more than this!” The “more than” confronts us everywhere, in every moment. In fact, our daily experience brings us face to face with an *inexhaustible intelligibility* in and around us. We can know and understand so much, but not all. The possibilities are inexhaustible. The more we know, the more we know we do not know. Every answer brings with it more questions.

Together with the discovery of the *inexhaustible intelligibility* in our lives comes the discovery of *ultimate uncontrollability*. Daily living contains constant reminders of our limits. The older we get the more obvious are these reminders. Again, it is inconceivable that the human family would ever reach the stage where everything was literally under control. Life will always be full of surprises, for better or worse. We will never exhaust the intelligibility of the world, nor will we ever be rid of our limits.

We call this ‘mystery’. Yes, life contains a multitude of problems that cry out for solutions. But more importantly, life is a mystery that must be lived. The problem-solving approach is good when we are dealing with problems. A different response – something much deeper – is required when we are dealing with mystery. Mystery calls for an attentive, listening response, and for trust and submission. Mystery – when we respond well – evokes humility and awe, reverence and gratitude, surrender and contemplation.

The more deeply we live our lives, the less helpful and the more destructive, in fact, is the problem-solving approach. For example, consider a work of art or moments of playfulness, a loving relationship, being with someone who is grieving or the moment of simply turning up for a new day with a measure of good will. There will normally be problems attendant upon such things or moments because problems and mystery are intermingled and intertwined in our daily lives. But the heart of such things or moments must not be treated as a problem. Such things and moments usher us into the presence of mystery. How well we respond will have a significant bearing on how well we live as human beings.

When we are faced with a problem the correct question is, “What can/must I *do*?” When we are faced with mystery the correct question is, “What *attitude* must I develop?” Here we are on the human ground of prayerfulness and the prayerful life. Our Catholic Tradition urges us to listen attentively to the promptings of the human heart at this point. Those promptings will point us in the direction of the Great Mystery beyond the ordinary mystery of our days.

For reflection

Take each text on its own and read it slowly and reflectively. Listen with the ear of the heart. Pause from time to time and listen to any movement within, whether it be a movement of resonance or resistance. Let the process lead you to some kind of words with God.

This life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then be asked what you make of it and have to answer, 'Scientific humanism.' That won't do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic, that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e. God. In fact, I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less. I don't see why anyone should settle for anything less than Jacob, who actually grabbed ahold of God and wouldn't let go until God identified himself and blessed him.⁷

Christianity in its true essence is the state of radical openness to the question of the mystery of the Absolute Future which is God. All individual statements in Christianity, in its knowledge and life, can be understood only as a modality of this radical commitment to refuse to call a halt at any point and to seek the fulfillment of its life, its 'salvation,' in something to which no further name can be assigned.¹⁰

The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing; we feel it in many things. I say that the soul naturally loves universal being, and naturally loves itself according as it devotes itself thereto; and it hardens itself against one or the other as it pleases.⁹

Very gradually we learn the crucial lesson of existence, that we do not ask what life has to give to us, but rather respond to what life asks from us. Then the question is no longer what can I get out of life, but rather what can life get out of me.⁸

For practice

Our days are filled with many things we generally do with little or no reflection – opening or closing a door, making a cup of coffee, folding bed sheets, walking along the street, washing our face, ironing, turning a light switch on and so on. This week, make a point of becoming present to yourself as you do these things. Slow down. Become aware rather than deliberate. Listen with the ear of the heart, be attuned to what is happening. You are actually a participant in something bigger than yourself. There is grace in each and every moment, each and every event.

