



Feeling with God:

With love God may be gotten
and holden;
With thought and understanding,
never.
The Cloud of Unknowing

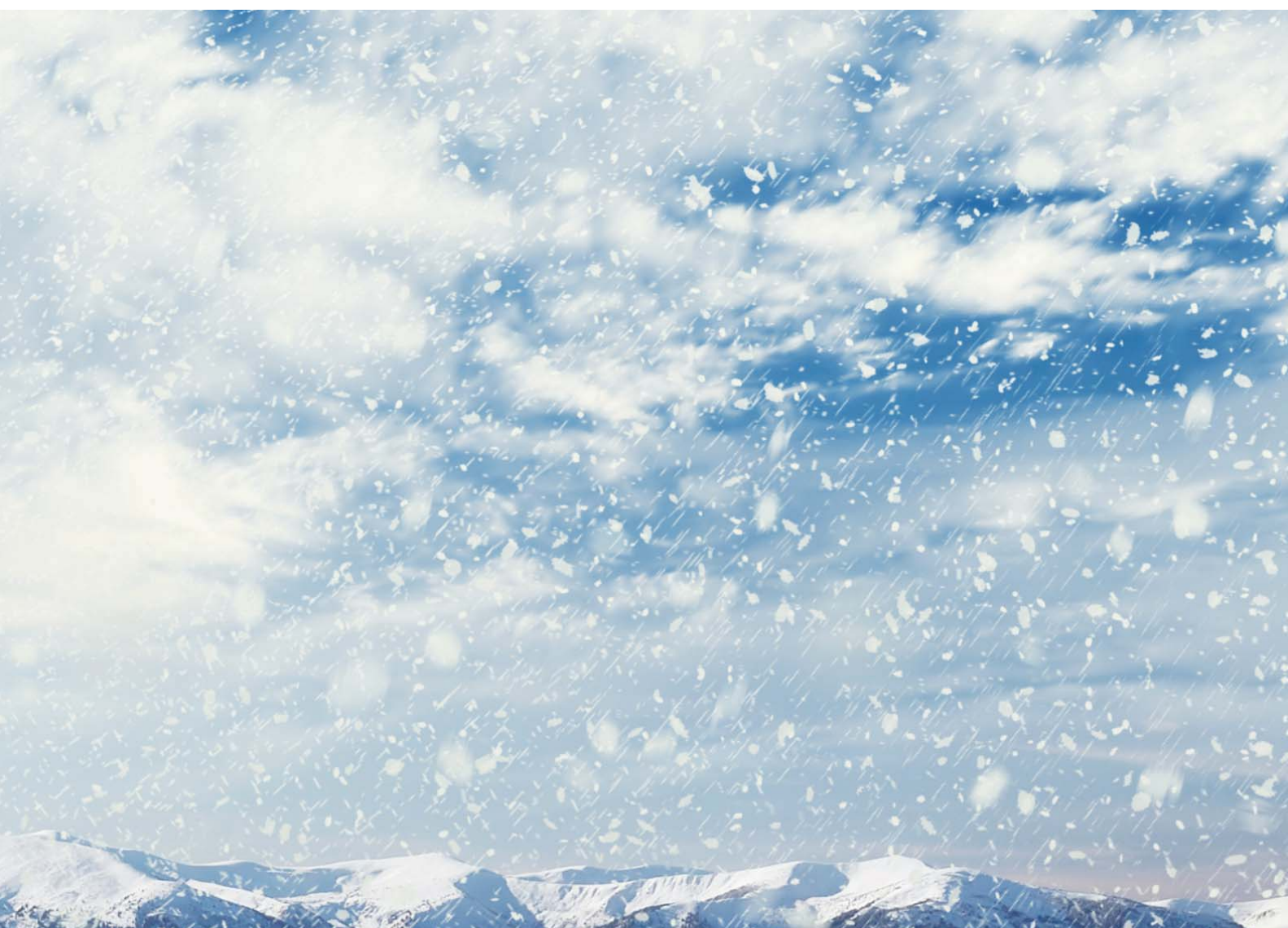
I remember a proof for the existence of God that I learned in grade school. God is the greatest being that can be conceived. A being that actually exists is greater than one that is simply a thought. Therefore, God exists! It was impressive thinking to my young mind. I had already learned the

Baltimore Catechism. “Who is God? God is the Supreme Being, infinitely perfect, who made all things and keeps them in existence.” All such ideas seemed important to me. Clearly all the adults were convinced that one of the most important things in life was to think the right way about God.

Right thinking was evidenced in right action. I did my best to make it clear I was in the right with all the adults I knew. I showed my faith in good works. I was kind, eager to please, careful never to harm; I became an

altar boy, went to daily Mass. I was making sure God would be pleased with me—or at least wouldn’t punish me. What that really meant was that I could be safe with all those powerful adults. God was one of their ideas. I went along with them. *Believe right. Act right. Earn love—or at least avoid pain.*

Those ideas carried me right through high school and into a religious order. It wasn’t until college that I came across the idea that God could be



Participation in Incarnation

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experienced. I believe it was in the writings of Gabriel Marcel. I remember being astounded and excited by the possibility that I could experience the “infinitely perfect.” It was an idea that opened a door. Around the same time I began to experience Ignatian prayer. I was quite intrigued by Ignatius’s encouragement to take time with an image, to notice the movements that occurred within myself. A couple years earlier I’d been on a “sensitivity marathon” with a priest-psychologist, and had my scholastic rationality rocked by the reality of

feelings. When I got to my thirty-day retreat it became clear to me that I was longing to feel the love of God. I found my way there and made myself at home.

Several years later, while studying theology, I did a paper on Christian mysticism. The quote at the start of this article from *The Cloud of Unknowing* became the centerpiece of my thesis. The path of every mystic began with the attempt to approach God with thinking. The inevitable frustration and emptiness of this led to the death of

thinking as the pathway to God. This paschal experience opened the mystic’s heart to the need to feel love. It was there that God could be experienced. The infinite became intimate in feeling beloved.

God is a person—and a relationship

The proof that you are sons and daughters is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries, Abba, Father!
Galatians 4:6

*God feels joy
when the beloved
is joyful; God
feels sorrow
when the beloved
is in distress.*

I relished the *experience* of the love of God. I planted myself there for an hour a day, drinking it into my cells. A couple years into this intimacy I took a theology class entitled “The Doctrine of God.” The professor taught it from his Latin notes, all based on ideas from the Council of Trent. I sat there and wrote my own version of sarcastic wisdom literature. “Woe unto him who chains God inside his thoughts, he will languish in the pettiness of his own mind.” I was angry. What great thinkers did to God seemed a violation to me. How absurd. To claim power over the all-powerful with raw, rational precision! Just because it was rational didn’t make it real.

Ironically, it was in that class that my mind and heart found a connection. It happened as I learned the classical doctrine of the Trinity. I sifted through *enhyposstatic* or some such term, and its fellows, to what fascinated me. The Father, all alone and longing for someone, emptied his love into the creation of a Beloved, the Son. The Son, overflowing with receiving the fullness of this love, returned it to its source. The love coursing between them was so profound, with such a life of its own, that it too was a person, the Holy Spirit. This exchange between the Father and Son became the focus for my experience of the love of God.

When I made my eight-day retreat to discern my call to priesthood, just before being ordained, I spent five hours a day in what has since been my internal home. I breathed in, imagining myself beloved, receiving God’s love. I breathed out, returning this love to its source. My mantra was simply, “Receiving” and “Releasing.”

I had found my way to the experience of God for which I had been longing. I came to know God as the person who loves me, God as Lover; and as the person whom I love, the Beloved; and as the relationship between us, the energetic flow of this love, the Spirit. And I came to know myself as Beloved, Lover and Spirit of Love. To this day, I experience myself as the image of the One whom I love. Whenever I turn in need to this love, the experience is there. It’s

like an embrace from the inside and outside at the same time. This embrace makes all well.

Spirit is the experience of God.

I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, the Spirit of truth . . . you know him because he is with you, he is in you.

John 14:16, 17

The radical implications of the experience of God have grown in clarity for me over time. While studying theology, another groundbreaking discovery came as I was studying Abraham Heschel’s book, *The Prophets*. Heschel asserted that *the prophets felt God’s feelings*. To me, this was a revolutionary concept. God had feelings! God was not infinite, immutable perfection, but vulnerable, intimately involved with his/her creation. God was affected by what happened with human beings. Well, of course God was affected. God was a person in relationship, and God was the relationship. This personal God felt what was happening in the relationship. This meshed with my understanding of a God who was love. In his/her love, God was empathically connected with the beloved. How could it be otherwise?

This means God feels joy when the beloved is joyful; God feels sorrow when the beloved is in distress. This makes sense of the immanence of God in salvation history. God is an empathic person, intimately present and responsive to the pleasure and pain of the beloved. God feels with the one God loves. To me this means that the energy in God’s feelings is the Spirit that connects God with the beloved.

Spirit is the intimate connection that is felt

when two or more persons experience love.

Spirit is the emotion experienced in relationship, the energy of divine love, flowing from within, connecting each of us in God.

When I am in touch with my feelings, I am experiencing the movement

*To be a person is
to join awareness
with choice.*

of the Spirit within me. Pleasure is the feeling I have when love is secure, and hopefully, lasting. Pain, fear and anger are the feelings I experience when love has been lost or is threatened. At any moment in relationship, if I allow awareness, *I am feeling the meaning of the relationship*, in terms of the relative presence or absence of love.

God is the person having the feelings. God is the personal energy, the Spirit experienced in the feelings. *Whenever I am aware of my feelings, I am feeling with God, just as God is feeling with me.* I am experiencing the flow of God's Spirit through my being.

Incarnation is God's revelation.

To have seen me is to have seen the Father, so how can you say, "Let us see the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

John 14: 9, 10.

The God of love does more than simply experience feelings. Though feelings have a life of their own, just as the Spirit blows where it will, love is more than a feeling. A person is more than a channel for the flow of the Spirit. Feelings do not determine what is done with them. *To be a person is to join awareness with choice.* God experiences the flowing movement of the Spirit, and God decides what to do with what is being felt. A person is not determined by the Spirit being felt. A person chooses how to express the emotion so that it is an authentic revelation of love.

Incarnation happens through every choice to reveal how the Spirit is moving at the moment. This is how Jesus is the revelation of God, and how I am the revelation of God, and how you are. Every person at every moment has the opportunity to make the word flesh. I do it when I choose to reveal the meaning of God's movement within me. I do it by saying who I am.

When I was studying theology and took a course in the Old Testament, the professor, Marcel Gervais, provided me with another revolutionary insight. The foundational event for the Jewish people was the Exodus. It began with

Moses' experience at the burning bush. Here was a former member of the power elite, once able to control others with his thoughts about what was right. That image of himself was shattered when he discovered he was born a slave. Lost and wandering, he experienced something that boggled his mind. A bush was burning—and not being consumed. Moses recognized the experience of the sacred, and entered an intimate personal relationship with God.

God told him he was not a slave—and neither were his people. They were free. Moses was to tell them this and lead them into freedom. Moses said he needed a name for God that would be powerful enough to scare the powers-that-were into letting them go. God said, "I am who I say I am." He gave Moses the divine essence of personal freedom. It was enough to change the consciousness of a whole people.

Many generations later, Gervais said, God's revelation to Moses became the core of the self-understanding of Jesus. When Jesus used the name of God in reference to himself, he was accused of blasphemy. Such accusations gave the would-be power brokers no power over Jesus. They did not get to say who he was. This divine power was given to him in his intimate relationship with the infinite God, a relationship so tender that he called God, Abba, something like, Daddy Dear.

I am who I say I am. This is the power of co-creation that I join with whenever I choose what to do with the energy stirring within me. I allow awareness of my experience of the Spirit in this moment. I feel the meaning of the love within my relationship(s) right now. I choose how I reveal the love that I am embodying. I am who I say I am. I am the revelation of God.

I am not saying that you have to agree with my thoughts, or that you must see God in me. I am saying that you do not get to tell me who God is for me. You are not the judge of my experience of God, nor I of yours. I can only say who I am. However, if we allow ourselves to enter into a relationship of emotional honesty, if we

allow the Spirit of love to flow between us, then we will discover the revelation of God in each other. Indeed, our relationship itself will be for us a revelation of God.

We feel the movement of God in our bodies.

Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God.

1 Corinthians 6:19

The body is sacred because it is the medium of revelation. Every artist needs a medium to manifest each moment of creation. So it is with the divine creator in me. My choices embody who I say that I am.

Every body incarnates emotional truth. The body does not lie. In it I experience the truth, moment to moment, of who I am in relationship to all that is other. Through it, moment to moment, I am choosing to make known to others who it is that I am. The more I try to shut down this inner truth, the more my body is in trouble. Medical research is making it increasingly clear that the psychosomatic component of every illness comes from blocking the flow of emotional energy through the body.

Unresolved fear of feeling shuts down the movement of the Spirit. In the body, the truth will win out; if not in conscious authenticity, then in unconscious symptomatology. The Spirit finds a way to move in the stifled body, crying out for healing.

It is in my body that the truth sets me free. My body attunes my awareness to the flow of the Spirit. Just as the ear can cultivate an appreciation of music, so embodied emotional awareness can be steadily refined. My bodily experience of the Spirit can be like being exquisitely attentive to a magnificent symphony—one being generated by the whole universe. And my body is for me the instrument with which I weave my part into the entrancing flow.

My body locates for me my place in the larger body of which I am a part. For example, I had lived for more than

twenty years as a Canadian immigrant in Chicago when 9/11 happened. As I was spellbound with the TV coverage for the next couple of days, I kept noticing the moments when I was most deeply moved. As I listened within, it became clear to me that I was resonating deeply with the suffering, the peril, and the heroism of my fellow Americans. These feelings told me I needed to become a citizen. I understood where I belonged by listening to my body.

I feel the meaning in my body. Each and every moment, experiencing the Spirit moving through me tells me where I fit in the larger whole. Whether focused on one relationship or a whole network of relationships, I feel the meaning of my connection with those I allow myself to love.

- I haven't seen my daughter in a while. I miss her.
- Many of my brothers and sisters are traveling a long way to my daughter's wedding. I'm grateful and excited.
- Our staff at Claret Center is working well together on the creation of an e-newsletter. I'm deeply satisfied.
- An editor is taking time to carefully consider my book proposal. I'm hopeful.
- A therapy client has just said goodbye after acknowledging amazement at her transformation in only a year. I'm sad and fulfilled.

Whatever the meaning of any experience, I feel it in my body. It's there that the Spirit moves. It's that movement to which I respond. I call my daughter. I email my siblings. I'm generous and joyful with contributions to the Claret staff project. And so on.

I feel the meaning.

I understand.

I create an intention.

I embody my response.

My body reveals to others where I am in relationship to them. My body reveals my reflection of the Spirit between us.

Childlike is Godlike.

Let the children come to me . . .
for it is to such as these that the
Kingdom of Heaven belongs.
Matthew 19:14

Children live in their bodies. The Spirit flows through them as naturally as the river to the sea. Unless they have been shut down by trauma or poisonous pedagogy, they embody their feelings. When happy, they bubble. When sad, they droop. When angry, they stomp. When afraid, they hide. When affectionate, they hug. Their embodiment of truth is natural.

Children live in the heart of life, in the raw reality of the paschal mystery. Until their childhood is curtailed, they openly feel the losses—and the gains. Until they are forced to become little adults, they flow smoothly through the joys and sorrows of passing paschal moments. Until the need for control takes them over, they die and rise again many times a day. As soon as they follow adults into playing God, they begin the alienation from their bodies. Once they are caught in trying to control what happens next, their bodies are steadily lost. The free flow of the Spirit becomes increasingly elusive. Inexorably the mind takes over. God becomes less and less a person to be experienced, and more and more an idea to get right. Dogma displaces devotion.

Childlike is Godlike because death and rebirth is a natural process. As with the seasons, so with the cycle of life. Every bloom will fade. Every plant will go to seed. All seeds must transform if new life is to flower again. Nothing new is born unless something old dies. The passage of time is eternal renewal. Every present moment fades into the past. Every now something new comes into being. Childlike people get this. They know how to let go what passes, and how to allow the surprise of what is coming to be. They can surrender to and engage in what God is doing as creation continues to unfold.

Childlike means joining God in what God is doing. God's activity is love, meaning God is active, making all well. When I love someone, I want all to be



well for them. When all is well, joy lasts and sorrow passes. Love attunes itself to the feelings that track the cycle of life. Love joins in the joy so that what is life-giving may endure. Love holds sorrow with compassion so that what is not life-giving may pass. Love feels the movement in every moment of the paschal mystery. A childlike person surrenders to this flow of love, learning how to join in, how to be an active participant in making all well.

When my daughter was four years old she showed me the clarity of her participation in this mystery. She'd been running through the house, fell and hurt herself (not seriously), and was whimpering. I walked right by her, proud of myself for holding back the "serves you right" that I regularly heard growing up. She went and got some compassion from her mom, and then a few minutes later stood defiantly before me. "Daddee, I am so angry wiff you," she

said. "You saw me hurting, and walked by like you didn't even care."

At her young age, she felt the meaning in her body. She found what she needed for the pain to pass. Then she moved on to the anger, and brought it to me, confronting me with a behavior that needed to pass. Reconciliation came through the initiative of a four-year old, simply by trusting the love present in her feelings. She didn't recognize the activity of God, nor did I notice how we were participating in the mystery. She was simply childlike, calling me to be the same.

Childlike means living each moment in the flow of the Spirit. It means feeling the meaning of each moment rather than predetermining what must be felt. Childlike means recognition of oneself as a small part of something big and wonderful. It means openness to mystery rather than controlling a tiny piece as if it were the

whole thing. Childlike is surrender and engagement. It is participation in the word being made flesh.

Feeling with God

Glory be to the one
whose power working in us
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine.
Ephesians 3:20

The more at home I am with my feelings, the more I live in my body, the more open I am to the presence of God. The radical truth of incarnation is the presence of God in my body, in my feelings. Whether or not I'm aware of it, God is with me, God is in me, God is flowing through me.

How do I grow to believe God is with me at every moment? How do I find the presence of God in my feelings? I do it with a daily review, wherein I feel the meaning of significant moments of my day. It is a

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form of the Practice of the Presence of God. I call it—surprise—feeling with God. You too may wish to follow these steps and thus participate more fully in the incarnation.

Feeling with God

1. Prepare

- Find a quiet setting where you will be undisturbed.
- Place your body in a position that supports being comfortable and alert.
- Breathe and relax, simply noticing whatever comes into your awareness in the present moment. Whether you notice sensations, thoughts or feelings, simply let them come and go. Stay with this until you have settled into being present with yourself.

2. Breathe with God

- Become aware of the presence of God, the presence of love, within you and all around you. If you like, imagine those who love you gathered in a circle around you.
- Breathe in, slowly and deeply, choosing to embody these words: *Receiving love, making all well.*

(Imagine and feel the love of God as energy with a color or sound flowing into every cell in your body.)

- Breathe out, slowly and deeply, choosing to embody these words: *Releasing love, making all well.*
(Imagine and feel the love of God flowing through you to all those who are in need.)
- Stay with this mantra until you feel well-grounded in your body, in the experience of the God who is love.

3. Feel the Meaning

- Now, allow the Spirit of love, as it flows with your breath, to bring you back to significant moments of your day.
- Feel yourself once again in a specific moment where your feelings were clear. Notice feeling content, joyful, scared, angry, sad, in pain or any variations on these. Let the feeling connect with your breath. Feel it in your body. Let it be there. Honor it.
- Feel the meaning. As you breathe with the feeling, open your mind to what it



tells you about your relationship to whomever or whatever it is that you love in that moment. Acknowledge the presence of God in this moment of love.

- When you are satisfied with feeling the meaning of one particular emotion, move on to another. Repeat until it is enough for now.

4. Sifting

- When you come upon an experience where something important is happening and you are unsure what you are feeling, spend a little time listening to yourself.
- With your awareness anchored in your breath, let yourself be in the experience once again, as if it were happening now. Tune your senses into what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, doing.
- As you're in the experience, notice what thoughts move through your mind. Just let the thoughts come and go. If they carry you away, come back to your breath and your internal image of what is happening.
- As you breathe, allowing your thoughts to come and go, notice any movement of

energy or internal sensation in your body. If you didn't hold yourself back, what does your body feel like doing?

- *Stay with it!* Bring yourself back to awareness of your breath, your thoughts, and your bodily sensations. Be in the experience with an open heart, welcoming whatever way the Spirit is moving in your body.
- When the feeling becomes clear, return to Feeling the Meaning, number 3 above.

5. Feeling Now

- Let go of reviewing prior experiences. Empty your thoughts by simply focusing on the rhythm of your breath.
- As you breathe, notice what you are feeling at this moment. Recognize the presence of God in this feeling.
- Acknowledge what the feeling tells you about the meaning of your day.

6. Set an Intention

- In closing, identify how you would like to be more aware of the presence of God in your day tomorrow.

- Invite the Spirit to call to and inform your awareness so that you may Feel the Meaning when God's love is moving through you.
- End your daily review.

Out of God's infinite glory may you receive the power of her Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong ... and then planted in love and built on love ... may you be filled with the utter fullness of God.
Ephesians 3:16-20.



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