1. A Different Experience

Power and Mysticism

In this first section, the writings included largely focus on Soelle’s mystical vision of the nature of religious experience and her view of God as one who is vulnerable because the power of God is powerless love. “Different experience” encompasses Soelle’s understanding that religious experience does not look to obedience to dogmas or church teachings as its core, nor does it search for moments that separate us from the everyday world. She rejects the focus on a supernatural God who is separate from the world and seeks to pull us out of the world and instead turns to a mystical vision of a God who encompasses the whole world and into whom we sink as the very ground of our existence in the world. For Soelle, such a vision of God pushes us to recognize God in the world, embracing all that is and present in everything. This also means that we no longer speak of God “out there,” but as that which is integral and connected to every single aspect of our life in the world. Nothing is secular for Soelle, for the God who is radically incarnated in our midst sacralizes everything. Mysticism is not something for the chosen few, but that which needs to be democratized so that all can see that of God which surrounds them and all can have the opportunity to express such experiences. God is involved in our lives, our loves, our work, and our politics. This involvement is not in the form of commands from on high that provide rules for us to obey, nor in the control of every event so that everything is willed by God, nor in the insistence on using the word “God” in public places, but in the form of the very interdependent web of life through which all of creation is connected. Power is revisioned as empowerment, so that good power is always shared between God and creation rather than used by an omnipotent God as a mechanism of control. Thus religious experience is about our connectedness to the very ground of our existence, our relationship with God who is bound into the web of life.

EXPERIENCE, NOT AUTHORITY

The best definition of mysticism, the classical definition, is a cognitio Dei experimentalis, a perception of God through experience. This means an awareness of God gained not through books, not through the authority of religious teachings, not through the so-called priestly office but through the life experiences of human beings, experiences that are articulated and reflected upon in religious language but that first come to people in what they encounter in life, independent of the church’s institutions.

Mysticism can occur, then, in all religions; and it almost always clashes head-on with the hierarchy dominant in its time. It is an experience of God, an experience of being one with God, an experience that God bestows on people. It is a call that people hear or perceive, an experience that breaks through the existing limitations of human comprehension, feeling, and reflection. This element of shattering old limitations is crucial to the mystical experience, and it is responsible for the difficulty of communicating mystical experience: It is impossible to speak
about what lies beyond the capabilities of speech, yet anyone who has had mystical experience feels compelled to speak about it. The language he or she uses will therefore be paradoxical, self-contradictory, and obscure. Or it may lead to silence, for silence is one of the modes of mystical experience.

What I would like to stress here is that we should not regard mystics as people at some great remove from ourselves, nor as people with unique experiences incomprehensible to all the rest of us. One of the greatest mystics and probably the greatest German mystic, Meister Eckhart, never—as far as we are able to tell—saw visions or heard voices. He reflected on religious experience without reference to these specific visionary or auditory phenomena. The crucial point here is that in the mystical understanding of God, experience is more important than doctrine, the inner light more important than church authority, the certainty of God and communication with him more important than believing in his existence or positing his existence rationally.

Here, too, I would like to give an example, one that did not originally come under the heading of mysticism but that illustrates the broad sense in which I understand this concept. During a class at the seminary where I teach in New York, the question of religious experiences came up. An embarrassed silence followed, of course. No one in this generation will admit to such experiences or can talk about them. Finally, though, a young woman raised her hand, and a week later she reported on her religious experience. What she had to say made a profound impression on me.

She told how she used to read a great deal when she was fourteen, especially at night, like so many of us. Her parents did not allow her to stay up late, because she was supposed to be asleep and living a well-ordered life. One night she had read in bed for several hours and then, waking suddenly at four in the morning with her head full of what she had been reading, she went out into the winter night, looked at the stars, and had—as she told it—a feeling of happiness that was unique for her, a feeling of unity with all of life, with God, an experience of overpowering clarity and joy, a sense of being cared for and borne up: No ill can befall me; I am indestructible; I am one with the All. This was the kind of language she used to describe her experience. She then went on to say that she didn’t have this experience again until later in her life and in a totally different context. This other context was a major demonstration against the Vietnam War. There, too, she felt cared for, a part of the All, felt herself together with others participating in the truth of the All. For her, both these experiences belonged together under the heading “religious experience.”

If this same young woman had lived in fourteenth-century Germany, she probably would have said, “I heard a voice, and it said to me, ‘I am with you’”—or something like that. Or she might have said, “I saw a light.” In the twentieth century, she can’t use that kind of language to communicate her experiences to others. She has to struggle with the language and with her own embarrassment. We have no language at all that can describe these experiences precisely, yet she had the courage to try to tell us what she had felt. And I would guess that if you look back on your own life history, you will recall similar experiences, states of “being high,” to use the banal expression, states related to mental and spiritual experiences for which religious language provides a kind of home or mode of expression.
Mystical experience is not, then, something extraordinary, requiring some special talent or sixth sense. Thousands of people in other cultures have had such experiences, experiences of this happiness, this wholeness, this sense of being at home in the world, of being at one with God. It makes no difference—and this point has been confirmed by everyone who has ever reported on mystical experience—whether these experiences are interpreted with the aid of a personal God or nontheistically, as in oriental mysticism. Whether we see these experiences in terms of the Tao or of God is not central to them. How we view them will depend on the culture we live in, our past experiences, the languages we have learned. What is appalling in our culture is that most people have no language at all for describing such experiences. And the result of that is, of course, that these experiences go uncommunicated to others, are lost and forgotten. We are unable to tell anyone else about the most important experiences we have.

- Strength of the Weak, 1984 (86-89); EW (33-37)

A MYSTICAL JOURNEY FOR TODAY

[Matthew] Fox’s way and that of traditional mysticism differ in two aspects. The first is where the way of mysticism is said to begin. In the understanding of mysticism inherited from the Neoplatonists Proclus and Plotinus, purging or purification is always the first step. The beginning of mystical piety is not the beauty and goodness of creation but the fall of human beings from paradise. That this loaded word “fall” does not appear in the Hebraic narrative of the expulsion from paradise seems not to be known. Instead, in this context, marked strongly by Augustine, there is little talk of creation, of the cosmos, and its original goodness. But does this not place the mystical journey at far too late a point in the course of the Christian history of redemption? One of the basic questions Fox asks again and again is whether we ought not refer first of all to the blessing of the beginning, that is, not to original sin but to original blessing? And is it not exactly mystical experience that points us to creation and the good beginning?

The second difference in comparison to the Western tradition of mysticism has to do with the vision of union with God. I agree with Fox on the matter of the via unitiva. He defines the goal of the journey differently in this stage; it is more world-related. The goal is creativity and compassion. Creativity presupposes union with the Creator, whose power lives in the oneness with us. Today we understand creativity not only as the transformation of an individual soul but of the world as a whole, in which humans could live together. To speak of this via transformativa means to embed the mystical project in the context of our life, which is marked by the catastrophe of economic and ecological exploitation.

For me, mysticism and transformation are indissolubly interconnected. Without economic and ecological justice (known as ecojustice) and without God’s preferential love for the poor and for this planet, the love for God and the longing for oneness seem to me to be an atomistic illusion. The spark of the soul acquired in private experience may, indeed, serve the search for gnosis (knowledge) in the widest sense of the word, but it can do no more. A genuine mystical journey has a much larger goal than to teach us positive thinking and to put to sleep our capacity to be critical and to suffer.
As in the journeys of former times, the stages of today’s journey flow one into the other. The three stages are as follows: to be amazed, to let go, and to resist. The first step taken on the way of mysticism is amazement. I relate an experience by way of example: When my oldest son was learning to read numbers, he stood still one day in front of a house’s number plate and did not move an inch. When I wanted to move him on with my “come on!” he said, “Look, Mummy, what a wonderful 537!” Naturally, I had never seen it. He spoke the number slowly, tasting it in a mood of discovery. He was submerged in happiness. I think that every discovery of the world plunges us into jubilation, a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality. Nothing is to be taken for granted, least of all beauty!

The first step of this mystical way is a *via positiva,* and it occurs in the primordial image of the rose that blooms in God. The jubilation of my five-year-old responds to the experience of “radical amazement,” as Abraham Heschel (1907–72) calls this origin of our being-in-relation. Without this overwhelming amazement in the face of what encounters us in nature and in history’s experiences of liberation, without beauty experienced even on a busy street and made visible in a blue-and-white number plate on the wall of a house, there is no mystical way that can lead to union. To be amazed means to behold the world and, like God after the sixth day of creation, to be able to say again or for the first time, “Look! How very good it all is!”

But it is not enough to describe this amazement as an experience of bliss alone. Amazement also has its bleak side of terror and hopelessness that renders one mute. The ancient Greeks already defended themselves against this bleakness by an injunction against adoring things; Horace summed it up in his motto *nihil admirari* (admire nothing). But this prohibition, with the help of which scientific thinking once was supposed to banish the fear of fear, has succeeded in banishing the demons together with all the angels. Gone is the sensation of paralyzing fright together with the ability to be marvelously amazed. Those who seek to leave behind the terrifying, sinister side of wonderment, the side that renders us dumb, take on, through rational superiority, the role of those who own the world. In my view, to be able to own and to be amazed are mutually exclusive. “What would it help someone, if he gained the whole world but damaged his soul?” (Matt. 16:26, in Luther’s German translation).

The soul needs amazement, the repeated liberation from customs, viewpoints, and convictions, which, like layers of fat that make us untouchable and insensitive, accumulate around us. What appears obvious is that we need to be touched by the spirit of life and that without amazement and enthusiasm nothing new can begin. Goethe’s friend Herder said that “without enthusiasm nothing great and good ever came to be in this world. Those who were said to be ‘enthusiasts’ have rendered humankind the most useful services.” This is exactly the point where the Christian religion — in a world that makes it possible for us human beings, through science, to create cosmic consciousness while, at the same time, through technology, also to undo creation—must learn anew from its own origin in the tradition of Judaism.

What this means in relation to where the journey takes its beginning is that we do not set out as those who seek but as those who have been found. The goodness we experience is there already long before. In an ontological and not necessarily a chronological sense, before the prayers of those who feel abandoned and banished there is the praise without which they would not
perceive themselves as banished ones. This ability for wonderment brings about consenting to one’s being here, being today, being now. “Being here is magnificent” (Rainer Maria Rilke). Like every form of ecstasy, this ability implies a self-forgetfulness that, as if by magic, lifts us out of ordinary self-forgetfulness and its corresponding triviality.

Amazement or wonderment is a way of praising God, even if God’s name is not mentioned. In amazement, whether we know it or not, we join ourselves to the heavens “who declare the glory of the Eternal One” (Ps. 19:1). “The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living.” Such an understanding of the wonder of being is not dependent on whether the origin of creation is conceived of in personal terms, as in the Abrahamic religions, or in nonpersonal ones. Radical amazement does not have to atrophy as scientific knowledge increases and better explains what is; on the contrary, such amazement grows in the finest scientific minds who frequently feel attracted to mysticism.

Can amazement, the radical wonderment of the child, be learned again? Whatever the badly misused word “meditation” means, it embraces a form of stopping and tarrying wherein individuals or communities intentionally set aside for themselves times and places other than the ordinary ones. Listening, being still, at rest, contemplating, and praying are all there to make room for amazement. “Hear this, O Job, stop and consider the wondrous works of God” (Job 37:14). The unknown name of the mystical rose reminds us of our own amazed blissfulness.

The practice of amazement is also a beginning in leaving oneself; it is a different freedom from one’s own fears. In amazement we detrivialize ourselves and enter the second stage of the mystical journey, that of letting go. If to praise God is the first prompting of the journey, then to miss God is another unavoidable dimension of it. The more profound the amazed blissfulness of the sunder warumbe (the utter absence of any why or wherefore), the darker the night of the soul (via negativa). The tradition that most often places this way of purification at the beginning and points out ever new ways of asceticism, renunciation, and escape from desires also teaches to discern how far one is from the true life in God.

Letting go begins with simple questions: What do I perceive? What do I keep away from myself? What do I choose? We need a bit of “un-forming” or liberation before we, in the language of Suso, can be “con-formed” to Christ or transformed. In the world ruled by the media, this “un-forming” has yet a wholly other status than it had in the rural and monastic world of the Middle Ages when life was so much less subject to diversions. For us who today know a hitherto undreamed abundance of available consumer goods and artificially manufactured new needs, this stage of the journey plays a different role than it does in the cultures of want. We associate rituals of purification and fasting most frequently with such puritanical “giving-up” performances alleged to be necessary in the development of industrial labor morality. In postindustrial consumer society, this ethics works less and less. Our letting go is related above all to our growing dependency on consumerism. We need purification (purgatio), both in the coercive mechanisms of consumption and in the addictions of the everyday working world.

The more we let go of our false desires and needs, the more we make room for amazement in day-to-day life. We also come closer to what ancient mysticism called “being apart,” which is living out concretely one’s farewell to the customs and norms of one’s culture. Precisely the fact
that our mysticism begins not with banishment but with amazement is what makes the horror
about the destruction of wonder so radical. Our relation to the basic realities of ownership,
vioence, and the self is changing. In this turning away from our rough ways (Entgröbung), the
road becomes increasingly narrower. Companions and friends take their leave and the initial
amazement clouds over. The symbol of the first stage of mysticism’s path is the rose, that of the
second stage is the dark night.

To miss God is a form of tradition called “suffering from God.” To become more and more
empty means not only to jettison unnecessary ballast but also to become more lonely. Given the
destruction of nature that marks our context, it becomes more and more difficult to turn back to
certain forms of our relationship to and with nature and to the original amazement. Mystical
spirituality of creation will very likely move deeper and deeper into the dark night of being
delivered into the hands of the principalities and powers that dominate us. For it is not only the
poor man from Nazareth who is tortured together with his brothers and sisters on the cross, it is
also our mother earth herself.

The horizon of ecological catastrophe is the backdrop before which today’s road of the mystical
journey has to be considered. To praise God and to miss nothing so much as God leads to a “life
in God” that the tradition called the via unitiva. To become one with what was intended in
creation has the shape of co-creation; to live in God means to take an active part in the ongoing
creation.

The third stage leads into a healing that is at the same time resistance. The two belong together in
our situation. Salvation means that humans live in compassion and justice co-creatively; in being
healed (saved) they experience also that they can heal (save). In a manner comparable to how
Jesus’ disciples understood themselves to be “healed healers,” so every way of union is one that
continues onward and radiates outward. Being-at-one is not individualistic self-realization but
moves beyond that to change death-oriented reality. Being-at-one shares itself and realizes itself
in the ways of resistance. Perhaps the most powerful symbol of this mystical oneness is the
rainbow, which is the sign of the creation that does not perish but continues to live in sowing and
harvesting, day and night, summer and winter, birth and death.

**Being Amazed**

*via positiva*
radical amazement
bliss

praising God
the rose

**Letting Go**

*via negativa*
being apart
letting go of possession, violence, and ego

missing God
the “dark night”

**Healing / Resisting**

*via transformativa*
changing the world
compassion and justice
living in God
the rainbow

- The Silent Cry 1997 (88-93); EW (61-67)

**UNITY**

Mysticism creates a new relation to the three powers that, each in its own totalitarian way, hold
us in prison: the ego, possession, and violence. Mysticism relativizes them, frees us from their
spell, and prepares us for freedom. Those powers project themselves in very diverse ways. The ego that keeps on getting bigger presents itself most often as well-mannered and civilized, even when it seeks to get rid of every form of ego-lessness. Possession, which according to Francis of Assisi makes for a condition that forces us to arm ourselves, appears in a neutralized, unobtrusive form. The fact that the very entities with which we destroy creation — namely, possession, consumption, and violence — have fashioned themselves into a unity in our world makes no impact, whether by design or through ignorance.

When women like Dorothy Day are not fixated on their own egos, or when fools without possessions, like some of Saint Francis’s sons and daughters, live different, liberated lives, they are met with smiles of derision. But when they dare to take real steps out of the violence-shaped actuality of our condition, they come into conflict with the judiciary or wind up in jail. More than anything else, violence must hide itself and always put on new garments, disguising itself in the form of imperatives, such as security, protection, technological necessity, public order, or defensive measures.

Here is an inconspicuous example. In June 1997, a member of the White Fathers, a religious community that is part of the “Order for Peace,” was fined for having demonstrated outside the chancellor’s office in Bonn with a picket sign saying “Cancel Third World Debts.” The office had refused to accept a petition, signed by twelve thousand people, sponsored by the campaign “Development Needs Forgiveness of Debts.” The harmless name of the violence behind which the chancellor’s office was hiding is the law of inviolable precincts; under present circumstances it is one of the many, actually quite sensible garments of state power. But the law is abused when the office of state protects itself against democratic interventions and expects submission to or passivity in face of economic violence rather than a decisive No! of noncooperation.

This rather insignificant example of civil disobedience illustrates how people make use of violence. For many it is no longer good enough to behave nonviolently in their personal lives and to submit to administrative regulations. For in such “nonviolence” and submission, as the powerful of this world define them, the real violence that renders the countries of the third world destitute is left untouched. To exist free of violence means much more than that: it means to think and act with other living beings in a common life. These forms of the freedom of opposition and resistance have multiplied in the last centuries also in Europe in the face of the militaristic and technocratic coercion. An essential and new role is played here by the basic insights of mysticism, such as those of the tradition of Gandhi as well as the Quakers.

In the eighties I was occasionally asked, especially within the contexts of civil disobedience against nuclear arms, whether I did not sense something in myself of the power and spirit of the other, the enemy: “Where is the Ronald Reagan in you?” I was in no mood to respond with a speculation about my shadow side. I do not think that a pacifist has to be complemented by a bellicist. Perhaps I did not understand correctly the seriousness of the question that seeks to grasp the unity of all human beings; to me the question seemed intent on neutralizing or mollifying what we were about. When I ask myself seriously what the principalities and powers that rule over me as structural powers claim from me, the answer is that it is my own cowardice that they seek to make use of. Those who submit to those powers also are part of the violence under whose velvet terror we live and destroy others.
Before he found his way to nonviolent resistance, Gandhi used to describe that time by saying that it was as a coward that he accommodated himself to violence. I understand this in a twofold sense. First, I submitted to external violence, which is to say I knuckled under, paid my taxes with which more weapons were produced, I followed the advice of my bank, and I consumed as the advertisers commanded. Worse still, I hankered after violence, wanted to be like “them” in the advertisements, as successful, attractive, aesthetic, and intelligent as they were. The existential step that the word nonviolence signals leads out of the forced marriage between violence and cowardice. And that means in practice that one becomes unafraid of the police and the power of the state.

The forms of resistance that revoke the common consensus about how we destroy creation have deep roots in a mysticism that we often do not recognize as such. It is the mysticism of being at one with all that lives. One of the basic mystical insights in the diverse religions envisions the unity of all human beings, indeed, of all living beings. It is part of the oldest wisdom of religion that life is no individual and autonomous achievement. Life cannot be made, produced, or purchased, and is not the property of private owners. Instead, life is a mystery of being bound up with and belonging one to another. Gandhi believed that he could live a spiritual life only when he began to identify himself with the whole of humankind, and he could do that only by entering into politics. For him the entire range of all human activities is an indivisible whole. Social, economic, political, and religious concerns cannot be cultivated in sterile plots that are hermetically sealed off from one another. To bring those sterile, sealed-off plots together in a related whole is one of the aims of the mysticism whose name is resistance.

- The Silent Cry 1997 (259-61); EW (68-71)

“SUCCESS IS NOT A NAME OF GOD”

How do we become free of the ego? In the twentieth century, Simone Weil provided a new instruction in preparing oneself for this work. In her endeavors she took up the notion of “attention,” perhaps from Buddhism. In one of her most beautiful essays, which deals with “a Christian conception of studies,” she combines school and university studies, generally associated with scholarly, scientific thinking, with the mystical sense of dedication that integrates and focuses us. “If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer.” Simone Weil explicitly brings attention and prayer together. “The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer.” Every exercise directed to our ability to be attentive changes us inasmuch as it diverts us from focusing on the self. “Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.” From this sort of understanding that hovers between concentration and attention a new freedom from the ego can emerge. It is perhaps the greatest step in the “un-forming” that Heinrich Seuse speaks of in his mystical journey toward the “acquiescing” human being. It is preconditional for being “conformed to the image of Christ,” which Simone Weil regards as the preparation for prayer. “Students must . . .
work without any wish to gain good marks, to pass examinations, to win school successes; without any reference to their natural abilities and tastes, applying themselves equally to all their tasks with the idea that each one will help to form them in the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer.” The purpose-free nature of Eckhart’s _sunder warumbe_ can hardly be put more clearly. “Attention consists in suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.” In this emptiness something evil in oneself is unintentionally destroyed and a kind of inattentiveness disappears. Simone Weil makes use of the beautiful examples of writers’ work in which one enters upon “a way of waiting . . . for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words.”

To reject the inadequate, not to be satisfied with it, is mystical activity. Emptiness is a better condition for the soul than being flooded with orientations that turn the ego into a helpmate of destructive reality. In rejecting inadequate words, we also reject inadequate feelings, images, conceptions, and desires so that in true prayer false desires vanish and others, greater and perhaps more mute ones, arise. Here the classical philosophical distinction between activity and passivity is abolished. The ego becoming free acts and, at the same time, lets itself be acted upon.

What do ego-lessness and becoming unattached mean in connection with today’s mystical way in the form of resistance? Concepts like asceticism, renunciation of consumerism, and using less and simpler ways of living make it apparent that the way of conscious resistance has to lead from ego-fixation (that globalized production requires as a partner) to ego-lessness. What is missing is a reflection that shows more clearly how complicit we are ourselves in the consumerist ego that the economy desires. I want to elucidate this in terms of a question that every nonconformist group, every critical minority wishing to contribute to the establishment of a different life has to face, namely, the question of success.

Decisions about possible actions are weighed in a world governed by market considerations by one and only one criterion: success. Is it necessary now to boycott certain aspects of consumerism, to blockade nuclear waste transports, to hide refugees threatened with repatriation, or offer pacifist resistance against further militarization? Whenever such topics are raised, questions like the following are regularly heard: “What’s the use of protesting, everything has been decided long ago?” “Can anything be changed anyway?” “What do you think you will accomplish?” “Whom do you want to influence?” “Who is paying attention?” “Will the media report it?” “How much publicity will it have?” “Do you really believe that this can succeed?” Sadly and helplessly, many people say; “I am with you, but this symbolic or real action is of no use against the concentrated power of the others.” Questions and responses like these nourish doubt in democracy, but worse, they jeopardize partiality for life. Behind questions like these lurks a cynicism that shows how powerfully the ego is tied into conditions and relations of power.

Martin Buber said that “success is not a name of God.” It could not be said more mystically nor more helplessly. The nothing that wants to become everything and needs us cannot be named in the categories of power. (That is why the “omnipotent” God is a male, helpless, and antimystical metaphor that is void of any responsibility.) To let go of the ego means, among other things, to step away from the coercion to succeed. It means to “go where you are nothing.” Without this
form of mysticism, resistance loses it focus and dies before our very eyes. It is not that creating public awareness, winning fellow participants, and changing how we accept things is beside the point. But the ultimate criterion for taking part in actions of resistance and solidarity cannot be success because that would mean to go on dancing to the tunes of the bosses of this world.

To become ego-less, unattached, and free also involves dismissing the agent of power within us who wants to persuade us that given the huge power of institutions, resisting has no chance of succeeding. To become unattached means, in addition, to correct the relation of success and truth.

I use my own experiences from the years of the German peace movement to elucidate the point. I assumed, with a certain naïveté, that the questions journalists put to me were motivated by an interest in truth. I thought it important to find out whether particular nuclear bombs could be used for defense apart from exclusive use in first-strike offensives. I wanted to have figures showing what armaments cost and then to relate this to what those moneys could do for the education and healthcare of children. I believed that the connection between arming ourselves and letting people starve was what had to be made known. And I assumed that those who asked me questions were also interested in such often concealed truths.

It took years before I understood that the majority of media representatives had quite different interests. They did not want to know and write about who the victims of arming ourselves are; they “covered” demonstrations and protesters only from the perspective of securing viewers for that evening’s news telecast. The interest in success, asking questions such as “who are you anyway and whom or what do you represent?” had increasingly superceded interest in truth. Attempts to revive an interest in truth, to make the victims visible instead of mindlessly orienting oneself to the winners, had little chance. Long years of mass movements for a peace no longer constructed on arms, for economic justice and solidarity, and for the integrity of creation have not succeeded. Discouragement over this is a bitter and undeniable reality.

Is what Bonhoeffer called “shoving a spoke in the wheel” something that we can do at all today? Mysticism of egolessness helps me deal with God’s defeats in this world. To get rid of the ego means not to sacrifice truth to the mentality of success, to become unattached and not to uphold success as the ultimate criterion. An Italian mystic of the fourteenth century, at one time a wealthy cloth merchant, let himself and his companions be bound and driven with blows and insults through the streets where once he made his money. Just as Christ had been regarded as a madman, so these friends of God wanted to be regarded as fools and idiots (pazzi e stolti).

Something of this foolishness is found in many forms of organized resistance. Women are met with rudeness and invective when they hold vigils for tortured prison inmates. To become free from the coercion of compulsory success is a mystical seed that is not always at the fore of consciousness but that does sprout precisely in the defiance of “keeping on keeping on.” A slogan was coined in the anti–nuclear energy movement that reflects some of this defiance of ego-lessness, Wer sich nicht wehrt, lebt verkehrt (the person who does not put up a fight, lives a wrong life). A Hassidic rabbi puts it in more pious language. Maintaining steadfast in prayer, he said: “and if you don’t want to redeem Israel yet then redeem the goyim alone.”
There are many mystical teachers who can help in satisfactorily reaching the point of no return with what they teach us concerning the unattached ego, about going out of ourselves, and about freedom from constraint. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and a leading opponent of the Vietnam War, wrote about the mystical foundation of this freedom in a letter to James Forest in 1966: “Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truths of the work itself.” He advises the younger pacifist to become free from the need to find his own affirmation. For then “you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it.” Living in mystical freedom one can say then with Eckhart, “I act so that I may act.” Being at one with creation represents a conversion to the ground of being. And this conversion does not nourish itself from demonstrable success but from God.

Years ago, American friends persuaded me that the best way to remember the infanticide of Bethlehem, when King Herod ordered all children under the age of two to be killed (Matt. 2:16–18), was for peace activists to go to the Pentagon on the second day of Christmas, which is dedicated to the remembrance of those innocent children, and pour blood on the white pillars there in order to give witness to what is planned and commanded there. I went along, but with many doubts. Was it only a gesture, a kind of theatrical production? What success would it achieve? The clearer that question became to me, the more astounded I was that my friends in this mystical peace movement, shaped by the Catholic Worker movement . . . , had left this question behind them. They had become free of it and their freedom seemed greater to me than my own.

- The Silent Cry 1997 (228-32); EW (71-76)