

## ***“Echoes of the Heart”***

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

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**When God seems absent.** Questions of belief or *unbelief* will always tantalize the human mind and spirit, as will questions of faith and doubt.

The nuances of these *matters of the spirit* very quickly tread on holy ground. When the absence of God comes close, when we wonder in our gut if indeed there is a God, for people who, all their life, have believed, it can be a chilling moment.

Crises of faith are not uncommon to the human situation. Nor are they necessarily unhealthy. It's human to doubt, to wonder, and to long for a more transparent presence of the Divine.

In the cover story of the September 3<sup>rd</sup> issue of TIME Magazine, we learned of the stunning revelation of Mother Teresa's fifty-year crisis of faith—her prolonged *dark night of the soul* experience when God seems somehow painfully absent.

The revelations come from a new book entitled, ***Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light***. The book is a compilation of Mother Teresa's personal correspondence with her confessors and superiors over a sixty-six year period.

The letters, published against her wishes, unveil her sometimes intense struggle with faith ... during periods of what she called *excruciating darkness ...and dryness ...and loneliness ...and torture*. Heavy stuff, to be sure!

**Humans and saints.** For me, these unfoldings elevate Mother Teresa's stature all the more as a person of compassion and love, making her even more saintly and worthy of our veneration. She was as human as you or I. Hallelujah! We can relate.

She agonized over the prospect that sometimes the *craving for God*, the desire to embrace the *holy*, is all there is. But the point is, it is enough. To know the *felt absence* of God or Christ is itself the substance of belief.

In her earlier years, Mother Teresa's most ardent spiritual desire was to somehow *share in Jesus' passion*. She was obsessed with a *willingness to suffer* on behalf of others. Unabashedly, she wanted to love Jesus as he had never been loved before.

Part of what's at play here is the great ego strength that Mother Teresa possessed; not a bad thing, but still, illumining of the complexity of her spirit. There was an impulse in her spirit to *share in Jesus' suffering* beyond what is possible. At the end of the day, none of us can literally *share* Jesus' cross with him.

His suffering and cross stand alone—at the center of Christian faith—as totally unique. They are for God and for the legions of believers through the ages.

What is utterly fascinating about Mother Teresa is the mix of her humanity with her spiritual yearnings. More than we ever knew, her inner life was at times in conflict. While she had enormous compassion in her spirit for the most miserable of the miserable, still, there were prideful moments when *ego-satisfaction* with her deeds left her feeling helplessly *less than* holy and pure.

**Reconciling the misery.** Interestingly enough, her *dark night of the soul* experiences began around the time she initiated her hands-on mission to the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta. It was there, amidst incalculable daily suffering and dying, with the apparent *absence of God* everywhere, that her periods of sustained darkness began.

We can only imagine, from a distance, the enormity of her strife. All around her, everyday, people in agony—suffering and dying. To be unwavering in feeling God’s presence in such circumstances would seem too much to ask.

Indeed, where was God? Where was hope? Where were the love and compassion of the salvation God promised?

However, on the other side of it all—the spiritual emptiness and feelings of God’s absence—Mother Teresa stayed the course. She held on, faithfully, living up to her commitments ... fighting through the darkness and pain; like Jesus on the cross when all seemed lost.

For us mere mortals who struggle with God, wondering, *How long, Lord, how long*, let us find encouragement in Mother Teresa’s tenacity of spirit. Let us find renewed strength in the humanity of her faith journey.

Let the new day come, indeed, and let faith transcend our doubts and the light of God’s love fill our every darkness.