

FEBRUARY:

The Confluence of Will and Grace (On Illness and Healing)

“It is impossible to write a book about psychological suffering in any form, without referring again and again to Teresa Martin.... At eight years old Teresa fell will with what was unquestionably a neurotic illness and was baffling to the doctors of her day... There were certainly natural causes for the curious illness, but there was also the supernatural one—that no one could better offer the burden of psychological suffering than this really good child: no one could sanctify the feeling of guilt better than she. She was preparing for our generation.”

--Caryll Houselander, 20th century British mystic and writer, *Guilt*

The literature on St. Thérèse is voluminous. There are hagiographies. There are revisionists. There are those who exalt, those who attempt to tear down, and those who try to make Thérèse into something other than or different from human. But one book no serious student of Thérèse should miss is *The Hidden Face*, by Ida Friederike Görres. With penetrating sympathy, acute intelligence, and brilliant psycho-spiritual insight, Görres delves deep to posit the innermost workings of Thérèse’s soul.

Here’s Görres’ description, for example, of what might have happened beneath the level of consciousness to effect Thérèse’s cure from the mysterious “neurotic illness” that struck, at the age of 11, after Thérèse had lost her mother to cancer and two of her older sisters to the convent:

“[S]he could abandon her wild despair over what she had lost, could really carry out the unendurable renunciation within the core of her ego, could release the hand of Pauline and reach across the irrevocable gulf for the hand of the Blessed Virgin. Or—and this was the other possibility—she could cling to her despair, could hold tight to her neurosis, could maintain her protest, stubbornly persist at all costs in the sinister attempt at blackmail which this disease represented.

Such decisions take place not by deliberate processes of thought, but far below the strata of thoughts and words, by a lightning-like opening or closing of the core of being.”

Thérèse may not have been brought to her knees in the particular way I initially had been—through alcoholism—but she *had* been brought to her knees by a “neurotic

illness”: her hypersensitivity; her inability to put the desire to please God before the desire to be noticed, coddled, and loved. Which—along with the neurological glitch that gives rise to the phenomenon of craving and the “allergic” response that gives rise to the mental obsession—is really what alcoholism consists of.

Görres’ description of the lightning-quick opening that takes place below the strata of consciousness parallels the yes to getting sober: a consent to grow up, take on the responsibilities of adulthood, and orient one’s life toward service. I may never have had a vision of the Virgin Mary, but I had come to know that the problem was not the world, but me. I may not have been completely relieved of my neuroses, but I had found much healing in a fellowship of brother and sister alcoholics who were trying to stay sober by taking moral stock of themselves, making reparations for harm done, and helping others.

As an alcoholic, in fact, I’d always been interested in the mind-body connection; in the way God seems to sometimes take us “out of the world” for a period of time, possibly in order to work on our subconscious. I, too, had experienced situations from which there seemed to be no escape. I, too, had been in the grip of a kind of darkness that seemed impervious to all reason, all human help, all prayer. Grace is needed and yet grace also seems most likely to appear—as had happened to me—when, from the depths of our heart we cry out our misery and ask for help. Most likely, perhaps, but not inevitably: in fact, the seeming randomness of who gets out from beneath the obsession for alcohol and who doesn’t; who stays sober for forty years and who dies in the gutter, makes this confluence of will and grace one of the deepest mysteries I know.

For in the end, what else except grace can “explain” when, why, and that we are ever saved from our compulsions, obsessions and neuroses? Why does one incest victim become a pathological hoarder and another open a clinic to counsel other incest victims? Why does one person end up in the psych ward and another channel her nervous energy into composing music? Why was Thérèse delivered and not the hundreds of thousands of others who have prayed to the Virgin Mary for healing?

We don’t know. We can only be grateful when and if the lightning-quick opening occurs. We can only know that we are not loved one iota more if we get sober, or one iota less if we stay drunk, and that we are all doing the best we can with what we’ve been given. We can only understand that the opening is an incipient “yes” to a lifetime of hard inner work. And we can accept as well that the “yes”—transformative though the effect may be at the time—doesn’t protect us from further troubles.

If Thérèse is the saint of our age, in fact, maybe one of the things she is saying most clearly is that Christ is the Way, not of rewards and triumphs, but of mystery and paradox: we’re “healed” not to revel in victory, but to develop compassion; to help bear the burden of those who are still suffering. Maybe, in fact, we need to revise our idea of healing. Maybe the people who are never healed, who carry the unbearable tension of wanting to get sober but not being able to; of wanting the neurotic illness to end, but of the illness not ending, are the ones who keep the world spinning on its axis. Maybe the fact that we pray at all is itself the “answer” to prayer. Maybe the deepest desire of our hearts is simply to turn toward God, not to have an “answer.” Maybe the most we can say is that we prepare ourselves to be open to grace—by prayer, the Sacraments, works of

mercy—even though we sometimes feel those things aren't helping us or anyone else at all.