



Seeing

with the

Heart

A Guide to Navigating  
Life's Adventures

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field of theology that explores what happens after we die and the world ends. In that last session, Bill was more pensive than usual, but seemingly at peace. Both Bill and Rahner expected, after their deaths, to enter fully into the Mystery who had summoned them their whole lives. This is the eternal home where, to use Elie Wiesel's image, after a life raising questions as prayers to God, "question and answer would become one."<sup>17</sup>

## Asking the Right Kind of Questions

Let me now add some nuance to my urging you to embrace questioning as an act of faith. Here again I rely on Professor Hellwig: "Clearly one must ask questions," she observes, "but they ought to be the right questions asked the right way." Through the learned Moishe, Wiesel concurs, "I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions." Consider questions as just another current on the river



we travel as pilgrims. To get where we want to go, we need to navigate the right currents.<sup>18</sup>

What makes a question “right”? The questions that are most helpful are those grounded in a sincere desire to know someone or something better. They help us understand where we are going and what is happening as we travel there. They help us go deeper, leading us to genuine insight, to another life-giving question, or even to a reverent silence pregnant with possibility for something new to emerge. They also serve to create and deepen relationships among those believers and seekers who are also wrestling with questions and answers. The “right” questions help us make sense of our restlessness and live more purposefully.

Other kinds of questions deaden growth or diminish others. They undermine learning by leading to superficial answers. They weaken friendship with God and others. These destructive questions are so laden with suspicion, cynicism, or resentment that no deepening of understanding or relationship can follow. Similarly, questions that are vehicles for self-promotion or proving ourselves right leave little room for something new to be revealed. No God of surprises can emerge there. In our politics we can point to too many examples of questions and inquiry that seek only to divide and take down. Sadly, our faith communities are not immune from such tactics.

Professor Hellwig presents us with another category of questions that she calls “dangerous.” These are questions that challenge, provoke, or unsettle us, but in a good way. They push us beyond the known and familiar to a new frontier where we experience God or another person in a novel, refreshing way or grow personally in ways we could not have imagined. For Hellwig, these hard or dangerous questions may reveal that our faith, or more specifically the Gospel, “is really much more demanding than we had previously thought.” They direct us to an unexpected but adventurous path. In our complacency, we might be tempted to remain in our comfort zone and avoid such questions, but if we confidently, even courageously, take

them on, they can lead us to remarkable places of growth.<sup>19</sup>

My experience in India, and the questions it raised, challenged my understanding of my faith: I became a better Christian the more I appreciated the religious convictions of my Hindu neighbors. I began to see religious diversity as an expression of God’s creativity and beauty. As I learned to accept the help of the patients and staff at the hospital who introduced me to their culture, my self-satisfied individualism and materialistic tendencies were challenged. In their place, I found a remarkable new community and freedom from unnecessary attachments that even my vow of poverty had permitted.

I was reminded of these lessons a few years later when I served as a chaplain in immigration detention centers in Los Angeles. Admittedly, I had not previously taken the cause of migrants close to my heart, even though I immigrated from Canada when I was very young (an easier migration than most of today’s migrants crossing seas and deserts) and even though the Bible and Catholic social teaching are replete with references to caring for migrants and refugees.

My conversion of heart began as I spent my days listening to the stories of migrants from Mexico, Central America, and East Asia. I prayed with women separated from their families. I walked around the small, enclosed concrete recreation yard with men who shared their life story with me. On my last day, one of them gave me a penciled sketch of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a devotion common among migrants from Mexico and Latin America. Another gifted me with a rose made out of toilet paper, tinted with green and red dye from diluted M&M’s from the vending machine. I carry both mementos with me wherever I live, so that I can keep the care and advocacy of migrants central to my identity as a Jesuit and a citizen. Questions have led to greater commitments: working with the Jesuit Refugee Service, writing and preaching about the needs of migrants, promoting first-generation and undocumented students, and spending time on the Arizona-Mexico border and in a refugee camp in Kenya. Questions are “dangerous” in a good way when they wake us



on him. Seeing and hearing is enough for Thomas. He responds with the greatest statement of faith in all the Gospels: “My Lord and my God!” a response that was worth the wait.

I imagine the turning point for Thomas was not the dramatic and visceral nature of Jesus’ appearance, but that Jesus showed up at all, and when he did, he greeted Thomas calmly, patiently, even lovingly. He loved Thomas as he needed to be loved, giving him time and space to adjust to a whole new reality breaking in. Jesus wanted to be known by Thomas, his friend. Thomas gets a bad rap, for in the end, he’s more believing Thomas than doubting Thomas, and he is very much like the rest of us. God can handle our doubts. It is we who need to be more understanding in the face of them.



As varied as the people asking them, questions and doubts emerge from the crucible of human experience, with all its ambiguities. We reflect on our lives, and questions stir; doubts emerge. Some questions find voice in words; others simmer or percolate just below the surface. Regardless of how or whether they are expressed, those questions—even the dangerous or hard ones—are just part of being human. We do not need to feel guilty about asking questions. God can handle it! Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel assures us, “We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers.”<sup>23</sup>

Questions that go to the heart of the matter are meant to be lived more than answered definitely, once and for all. We do well, then, to heed the advice of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who counseled a young poet “to have patience with

everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves.” He offered counsel in words that ring true for us today: “Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”<sup>24</sup>

“Live the questions” can be exceedingly frustrating advice for someone who wants more clarity in a frequently chaotic world or has long wrestled with their faith and desires some peace. As one who yearns for answers too and struggles with impatience, I get it. Yet Rilke’s counsel is not an exercise designed to aggravate or test us, but an invitation to greater depth, in a culture that tempts us to superficiality and easy answers. With Rahner, we eventually recognize that, in our encounter with Holy Mystery, every answer is just the beginning of a new question. We learn to appreciate that questions that unfold into other questions are unexpected gifts, as special as a loving relationship that continues to surprise.

If, in the end, we fall silent, or fall to our knees, this is no sign of failure, but the surest indication that we are headed in the right direction, because the end of our pilgrimage, with its paths both winding and straight, is God, whom we call Holy Mystery. If we persist on the journey, with its signposts in the form of questions, we might discover something remarkable: this God whom we seek and question is actually seeking us more.

### Spiritual Exercises

- Which questions or doubts do you have that are related to your spiritual journey? They might be explicitly religious questions about who God is or about the practice of your faith tradition. Or they might be questions about challenging human experiences. Which questions are helpful



and constructive? Which are not? Which are “dangerous” or particularly challenging for you? Discuss with a trusted friend these questions or doubts. Or simply write them down and pray over them, voicing them to God (however you imagine God).

- Which images or descriptions of God have you relied on? How are they helpful? How are they limited? Which images do you need to let go of? Which images or names for God appeal to you now? For example, Rahner suggests “Holy Mystery.” The Irish Jesuit and spiritual writer Brian Grogan, SJ, proposes “Loving Presence.” Author and advocate Greg Boyle, SJ refers to “The Tender One.”[2526](#)
- In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius suggests that we imagine having a conversation with Jesus “as one friend speaks to another” (SE 54). Pick the setting you want. I often talk with Jesus while walking along the beach (no surprise given my Florida roots). This kind of imaginative exercise makes prayer more real. Speak from the heart. Let go of formulistic ways of praying when they are not helpful. *What’s on your mind? How are you feeling? What’s going on in your life? What are the questions that you have articulated? What are you looking for now in your life?*