Shame, Mystical Writers, and a Spirituality of Self

In an article in this journal (November-December, 1990) about shame-bound older religious, I described those "whose poverty of self-esteem seriously diminishes the capacity to enjoy the fruits of their spiritual life" and "the quiet courage with which these religious draw upon their spiritual life as a source of self-empowerment" (p. 855). Several readers who included themselves among the "shame-bound" responded that the article omitted the significant influence that writings by mystics had on their progress from shame to self-acceptance. Though they concurred with the urgency of seeking counseling for shame-bound behavior, they also pointed to themes in the mystical tradition that facilitate the recovery of self-esteem. This article incorporates these mystical themes into an integrative model of "successive selves" to clarify the restorative influence that the mystical tradition can provide for shame-bound religious.

A Progression of Selves

"Self," as the foundation for self-esteem, is not a univocal concept. Adults, in fact, need to have integrated a sequence of selves in order to realize their potential. Children first internalize an ought-self. This primitive construct represents their understanding of the expectations of those persons upon whom they

James J. Magee DSW is the author of "Life Review, Families, and Older Religious" in our March-April 1993 issue. His address is Graduate School; College of New Rochelle; New Rochelle, New York 10805.
are dependent (Skager and Kerst, 1989). Thus, in those situations where children's temperaments make them fearful, where the responses of caretakers to children's behavior are not sufficiently empathic, and where the environment does not provide enough security, self-esteem is at risk. Given this confluence, failure to meet expectations can elicit feelings of shame that arrest development at the ought self. These feelings override later maturing analytical abilities and even inhibit speculation about the continuing appropriateness of many of the expectations. Shame-bound older religious have to some extent experienced themselves throughout their lives in terms of ought-self.

Adolescents imagine an ideal-self, a model of the perfect self they wish to become that coexists with the earlier self (Birren, 1991). Developmentally functional adolescents affirm internalized expectations which support their ideal self, repudiate those they find irreconcilable, and temper others in service to their ideals. Shame-bound older religious, however, had subsumed their ideal-self within their ought-self converting ideals into obligations, unyielding standards by which to measure their worthiness.

Young adults, in turn, need to integrate these earlier selves into a functional-self which manages the interpersonal activities and intrapersonal processes through which individuals express their continuity of self over the life cycle (Riker, 1991). Functional-self affirms individuals as having "a place in the world, the right to express themselves, and the power to affect and participate in what happens" to themselves (Napier, 1990). Insofar as they have not achieved this integration of selves, however, shame-bound older religious have been unable to accept themselves as "good enough," and to trust their intuitions.

Self-fulfillment also draws adults toward a "collective-self in which the self becomes egoless, identifying with the concerns of larger groups" (Bednar, Wells, and Peterson, 1989). Through
their dedication to a cause, commitment to others, and fidelity to the vowed life, adults affirm the interdependence of humankind. Individuals cannot be for themselves unless they are for others. Shame-bound older religious can subvert collective-self, however, with latent agendas of earning others' respect or of proving their own worth by doing good to feel good.

The Mystical Tradition as Access to Self

Mystical tradition addresses the *metaphysical-self*, that secure core of identity which resides in God and in which God resides. This is not a social construct to be understood, but a gift to be accepted. At this core, God's esteem is the foundation for self-esteem. Several texts which readers submitted illustrate the mystics' insight into metaphysical-self:

I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are.

- Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

The soul is so completely one with God that the one cannot be understood without the other. One can think heat easily enough without fire and the shining without the sun, but God cannot be understood without the soul nor the soul without God, so utterly are they one.

- Meister Eckhart, *German Sermon #59*

Our soul sits in God in true rest, and our soul stands in God in sure strength, and our soul is naturally rooted in God in endless love.

- Julian of Norwich, *Showings*

Do not cry out to God. Your own heart is the source from which He flows unceasingly unless you stop its course.

- *The Book of Angelus Silesius*

A seventy-two-year-old friar described how metaphysical-self as a mystical theme helped him to integrate ought-self. He had ambivalently agreed to retire from his primary ministry as an education administrator, and intended to examine new opportunities for ministry during his first retreat since retiring. He awoke before dawn on the second day, however, gripped with dread that
he either might not want to assume a new ministry or did not have the character to carry it out fruitfully. Beleagured by shame, he sought to quiet himself by centering upon God as the ground of his being. As a mantra, he adopted as his own the greeting, “Lord, your dear friend is sick” (Luke 11:3). For the next hour he slowly repeated this phrase, identifying himself with Lazarus. Even though he could not “see himself as he really is,” nonetheless, the friar found that patient attentiveness in centering prayer became a healing gift in itself. By centering himself when he felt the anxious clutch of ought-self, he integrated ought-self as a cue, alerting him to acknowledge the transcendent dimension of self, his metaphysical-self.

The apophatic experience of simply being-in-God through centering prayer “is gift enough,” he claimed. Self-criticism was absent, and he rested equanimously in the “divine night” of God’s unconditional acceptance. To illustrate this point, he cited from the mystical tradition:

Surrounded by the divine night the soul seeks Him who is hidden in darkness. She possesses indeed the love of Him whom she seeks, but the Beloved escapes the grasp of her thoughts. . . . She recognizes Him whom she desires by the very fact that His knowledge is beyond understanding.

Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses

From the unity of God there shines into a person a simple light. This simple light shows itself to be darkness, nakedness and nothingness. In this darkness, the person is enveloped . . . overwhelmed by the activity of God’s immense love.

Van Ruysbroeck, The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage

[The mystical knowledge of God] is ineffable darkness and yet it is essentially light. . . . By “darkness” here you must understand a light which will never illuminate a created intelligence, a light which can never be naturally understood; and it is called “desolate” because there is no road which leads to it. To come there the soul must be led above itself, beyond all its comprehension and understanding.

John Tauler, Sermon XI for Monday in Passion Week

Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after him whom you love. For if you are to feel Him or to see in this life, it must always be in this cloud, in this darkness. . . . Though your natural mind can now find “nothing” to feed on, for it thinks
that you are doing nothing, go on doing nothing, and do it for the love of God.

The Cloud of Unknowing

The friar approached his own prayer of unknowing as a graced opportunity to affirm his readiness, at least, to share in God's delight in him. He bought a wristwatch with an alarm that he set to signal on the hour and again ten minutes later. During each waking hour when he was not interacting with others, he spent the first ten minutes in centering prayer. He captured his emerging sense of self as "gift and gifted" in Merton's exaltation, "What am I? I am a word spoken by God. Can God speak a word that does not have any meaning?" (Merton, Contemplative Prayer 84).

"What am I? I am a word spoken by God. Can God speak a word that does not have any meaning?"

The friar returned to the theme of engaging in new ministries—this time from the perspective of ministry as an expression of his "meaning." He quoted Augustine's exhortation, "Let there be one Christ loving Himself," to affirm that centering on metaphysical-self was, in fact, a shared, interactive experience. This "one Christ"—as collective-self—was an opportunity to extend the empathy and connectedness that all need to develop their gifts. In the friar's words:

Let me take the metaphor literally that God is the ground of our being. Rooted in God, I am alive, a fruitful tree. Uprooted, I am a board, a stick. To appreciate my gifted embeddedness in God, however, I need the perspective that I am part of an orchard. Others' seed, shade, spacing, and purpose are integral to my self. This perspective enables me to move from fruits to roots.

From this perspective he discerned two ministries in which he could draw upon his troubled history with ought-self now as a resource. He began participating in oral history and reminiscence groups in senior-citizen centers, adult homes, and skilled nursing facilities. The group goals of healing memories and discerning meaning for one's life required candid self-revelation. Transcending lifelong constraints, he speaks openly about the consequences of his battered self-esteem and the purposes he now
sees it has served in his life. His ministry is showing others how in their lives God can write straight with crooked lines.

Even more challenging emotionally, he has brought his gentle candidness to his extended family. The family dynamics relevant to his own marginal self-esteem have also diminished the self-esteem levels of other kin. With empathy heightened by his own challenges in life, he has been a resource for family members about the folklore, slogans, and modeling that have affected self-esteem across the generations. My recent article in this journal included examples of the friar's ministry with his extended family in which he speaks the truth in love (March-April, 1993).

**Conclusion**

The goal that Augustine set for Christian self-acceptance, that "Christians should be an alleluia from head to foot," is ordinarily too challenging for shame-bound older religious. The mystics' recognition that God delights in each metaphysical-self, however, can radiate an equanimity during centering prayer that enhances self-esteem and guides its expression in ministry. God's acceptance empowers self-acceptance, the emergence of an integrative functional-self, and a heightened spontaneity to find/lose self in God and others. The mystical tradition maintains that self-centeredness can be God-centeredness:

> We know God insofar as we become aware of ourselves as known through and through by Him. We "possess" Him in proportion as we realize ourselves to be possessed by Him in the inmost depths of our being.... Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of Him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on His saving and merciful knowledge of us (Merton, Contemplative Prayer 103-104).

**References**

