

The Ecstasies of St. Francis: The Way of Lady Poverty

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Francis . . . was a merchant
who bought the pearl of the Gospel Life,
selling and giving away all he had
for the sake of Christ.

(*MajLife*: XI, 14)

Saints' lives (hagiography) constitute a genre all their own. The writer is concerned to emphasize the sanctity and exemplary nature of a religious hero. Purely human details that would be quite important in a modern biography are avoided in favor of seemingly extraordinary details, told in such a way as to imply supernatural agency, miraculous interventions, and signs of divine favor. Generally the work begins with an account of the sinfulness and spiritual ignorance of the future saint's early days. This is followed by a painful and dramatic conversion experience which sets the stage for decades of self-abnegation and unremitting holiness in which miraculous events become more and more frequent until martyrdom or a beatific passing crowns a life designed to inspire us all. After death there is usually a spate of miracles and pious recollections that strain the credulity of modern readers, all in justification of papal canonization, the infallible declaration that the subject now unquestionably lives in heaven with God and therefore can be a reliable model for the rest of us.

Although the "Lives" of Francis follow this plan quite closely, it is noteworthy that nothing particularly sinful has been remembered from his early life. He was a high-spirited, fun-loving scamp both before and after his conversion -- talented at organizing parties, games, and songs. By some accounts his pre-conversion eccentricity reached nearly to the point of clownery, while prefiguring his post-conversion behavior: "Sometimes . . . [he] would insist on the richest cloth and the commonest [be] sewn together in the same garment" (*3Comps* : 2). His playful grandiosity sought to compensate his commoner's birth by flamboyantly spending his father's money in acts of generosity. Compared to the nobles he knew, he was "poorer in matter of wealth, but more lavish in giving things away" (*ICelano*: 4). In short, he was a spendthrift and squanderer both before and after his conversion.

The difference lies not in his prodigality but in his motives. Formerly he sought approval of his friends and dreamed of distinguishing himself as a knight -- not so much as a warrior but as a splendid figure. His father must have looked on with ambivalence, proud of his son's courtly ways yet worried about his heedlessness. Even selling his father's possessions so as to "repair my church" belongs to his life before sainthood insofar as it cost him nothing. Indeed, had the gambit succeeded it would not have been Francis who had repaired the church but his father. He was seeking to fulfill the command in a merely formal and literal manner, taking no personal responsibility, running and hiding from his father. Instead of taking a stand he was bobbing and weaving. Only when his father cornered him before the bishop did he finally take the step that opened up his saintly future.

In this way the biographers make it clear that the "sinful" son of Pietro underwent a psychological reversal of some sort and redirected his attention from an outer world to an inner, from social approval to a sense of inner coherence. They are rather vague, though, about how he got to this point. The wooden statue of Christ spoke to him only after he had already been seeking out-of-the-way places in which to pray. What brought that on? We are given only one inadequate incident by way of explanation. One day when Francis was tending his father's store, he refused a beggar who requested "alms for the love of God." Shortly thereafter he bitterly regretted his action, realizing that he would have given the man something, had he asked "in the name of some great prince" (*3Comps*: 3). Already guilt formulates the theme of his saintly life: an earthly prince versus "the King of kings and Lord of All." We are not told how he got to the point of seeing life as a contest between a pair of competing kingdoms. Certainly it was a common medieval metaphor. But how many, after all, took it seriously? To found one's life-decisions on the premise that the kingdom of heaven is real and viable here and now, if only we can banish the world of common sense, already suggests a candidate for sainthood. The hagiographers, therefore, give us an unconscious saint before the conversion and a conscious saint afterward. None of them had known the old Francis. Whatever fragments of rumor they had heard about his earlier life were naturally interpreted within the context of the religious hero they came to know years later.

Before the change of heart, he was struggling to craft a joyous life free of worldly cares. Eventually some incident, such as the one with the beggar, alerted him to the fact that God had to be an important factor in the struggle, and he began to seek deserted places in which to pray over the issue. Apparently he did not at first discontinue his partying, spendthrift ways or his compulsion to make himself look good in the eyes of others. Indeed, his stripping before the bishop might have been an impetuous act, made on the spur of the

moment, possibly out of anger because his "honor" had been challenged. He may have tricked himself into taking on poverty as a way of life and had not the faintest idea that it could become a *sadhana*, a spiritual practice. Too proud and obstinate to relinquish the plan of repairing the rundown chapel -- or possibly intimidated by a God who could make a wooden statue speak -- he began begging the stones and other materials he needed to rebuild it with his own hands. His life of genuine poverty had begun, though he did not yet grasp what it meant.

Reversal of Values

Although discovering the nature of spiritual poverty and what it could do for his body-and-mind surely involved a process of experimentation that lasted several years, it is certain that the notion of having no possessions recommended itself to Francis in the beginning on account of the gospel stories of Jesus. Poverty was the most obvious characteristic of the day-to-day life of Jesus, who had been born in a manger and throughout his public life had had "no place to lay his head." Poverty, Francis said, "has Christ" (*2Celano*: 84). Therefore he instructed his followers to glimpse the sacred in every hungry and ill-clothed person they met. "When you see a poor man, Brother, an image is placed before you of the Lord and his poor mother" (*2Celano*: 85). The poorer the man, apparently, the more of Christ, for Francis found himself envious of travelers more ragged than he was. He eagerly exchanged garments with them, or clothed them in his own robe, going naked until chance should supply a replacement (*Mirror*: 34).

At least in the beginning, poverty functioned as a sort of badge for Francis. On the one hand, it amounted to a public declaration, a silent act of preaching by which he hoped to model for others a life founded in God-consciousness. On the other hand, putting on the most despised of tunics and robes constituted a personal act of mindfulness. He engaged in a daily ritual of vesting himself in the garments of a cosmos wholly at odds with the world of public opinion. Just as a pre-literate tribesman dons the paraphernalia of the gods or culture heroes celebrated in his tribe's mythology and then dances his way into an ecstatic identification with those sacred personages, so Francis put on the ragged garments of those who, like the lilies and the birds, had nothing to depend upon but God.

He must have discovered very early in his *sadhana* of poverty that trading downward was a most effective technique of ecstasy. The *Legend of the Three Companions* formulates this very convincingly as God's answer to Francis' prayer:

[God says:] "O Francis, if you want to know my will, you must hate and despise all that which hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess. Once you begin to do this, all that formerly seemed sweet and pleasant to you will become bitter and unbearable; and instead, the things that formerly made you shudder will bring you great sweetness and content (*3Comps*: 11).

Perhaps Francis actually heard these words with his inner ear. If not, they are at least central to what his closest "three companions" remembered about him. For whatever *God* says is bound to be important; and if God has something to say about awareness of our body-and-mind, we will have to take these pointers very seriously, indeed. In this passage we are given the internal criteria for Francis' life of reversal. What "formerly seemed sweet and pleasant" and "your body desired" will become repugnant; and the horrifying will become

sweet and fulfilling.

As far as our feelings are concerned, the sacred world is just the opposite of this one. The things we look forward to here are what hold us here; and we will know when the reversal has occurred, for then those same things will have become repugnant. We will have no taste for them, for it is they that pull us back from the ecstatic world. Similarly, what we find "bitter and unbearable," the things that make us "shudder" here in the conventional world are but hidden gateways to the kingdom of God, and therefore promise to bring us "great sweetness and content." The words ascribed to God in this incident redirect our attention to how things feel and illustrate how it is that the body-and-mind we always have with us is the key to transforming the world. Unfortunately, however, for most of us nothing is more habitual than overlooking and downplaying the reactions of our body-and-mind. In contrast, Francis constructed a disciplined religious practice upon the reactions of his body-and-mind. By attending to what we habitually discard, he learned to convert the events of everyday life into the means of transcending them.

Having started out with the idea of imitating an external model, the poverty of Jesus, a major change has taken place when Francis begins looking within for guidance. We do not know how many months may have elapsed between the scene before the bishop and his discovery of the reversal of values, but there cannot have been many. Stories are told about the days when Francis was only a noteworthy eccentric, and not yet a living saint. Brothers Leo, Angelo, and Rufino, the "three companions," recall how they were "exalting and joyful in the face of the jeering and mudslinging" they received (*3Comps*: 40). A fourth companion, Brother Bernard, who had formerly been a wealthy nobleman, explains, "It is true we are poor, but to us poverty is not the burden it is to others for we have become poor voluntarily by the grace of God" (*3Comps*: 39).

The Joy of Poverty

The fact that the *sadhana* of poverty reverses all values was the first and most fundamental lesson a friar had to learn. Therefore, when Giles was seen to give "his cloak to a poor man with great cheerfulness," Francis immediately received him into the Order (*Mirror*: 36). He had passed the essential test. Because he knew the joy of poverty, he was already capable of dissolving the material world into the sacred cosmos. He already had the soul of Francis within him. This principle is most famously described in a monologue in which Francis instructs his closest companion and scribe, Brother Leo. Perfect joy, says Francis, has nothing to do with saintly accomplishments, including miracles and the conversion of infidels. Rather we know we have experienced perfect joy when we come home soaked, frozen, and weak with hunger, only to have the porter refuse us entrance, then insult us and beat us with a club.

. . . if we endure all those evils and insults and blows with joy and patience, reflecting that we must accept and bear the sufferings of the Blessed Christ patiently for love of Him, oh, Brother Leo, write: that is perfect joy!

And now hear the conclusion, Brother Leo. Above all the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ gives to His friends is that of conquering oneself and willingly enduring sufferings, insults, humiliations, and hardships for the love of Christ. For we cannot glory in all those other marvelous gifts of God, as they are not ours but God's . . .

But we can glory in the cross of tribulations and afflictions, because that is ours . . . (*Flowers*: 8).

We misunderstand a passage like this if we think Francis is saying we should "put up with" suffering and indignity. He also does not mean we should cultivate some sort of immunity to pain. He means that *when such discomfort does not disturb our joy*, then we will know that our joy is "perfect." Perfect joy is the gold standard. We know we have gained access to the sacred cosmos when our joy is imperturbable.

Clearly perfect joy is no ordinary emotion, for the joy we have in completing a project, besting an opponent, or making love to our spouse always dissolves in the face of frustration, indignity, and pain. Perfect joy is immune to the ups and downs of the conventional world because it lives elsewhere. It is the distinguishing mark of our entrance into the sacred cosmos. When handing over our cloak or automobile brings us perfect joy, we have dissolved the everyday world into a larger reality. If we pay attention to what is stirred up within us while these events are taking place, we begin to appreciate that yielding in poverty changes the world and keeps our body-and-mind in a blissful state. We are no longer "there" in the world of public opinion, but on another plane entirely. The spiritual practice of poverty is a genuine *sadhana* because it changes our consciousness, revealing a joyous reality beside which the everyday world appears cramped and depleted. Were it not a far more capacious, interesting, and fulfilling world, our joy would not be perfect.

The Discipline of Poverty

Churchly authorities were never comfortable with Francis' radical poverty. If they guessed its potential for consciousness changing, they might have been afraid it could spark an enthusiastic movement in which thousands might leave the church and set up a rival and "heretical" institution. Mostly they spoke diplomatically of the impracticality of absolute poverty and worried about the health of Franciscans. Knowing the bishops had barely a clue as to what he was doing, Francis answered them in pretty much their own pragmatic language:

My Lord, [he said to the bishop,] if we had any possessions we should also be forced to have arms to protect them, since possessions are a cause of disputes and strife, and in many ways we should be hindered from loving God and our neighbor. Therefore in this life we wish to have no temporal possessions (*3Comps*: 33).

In other words, "Don't distract us from the joys of the sacred cosmos by entangling us in the struggle for possessions." The official church was already overly entangled. Francis knew from experience that entanglement begins subtly and for the best and most rational of motives. As soon as a truly poor man becomes "almost poor" he has possessions to worry about, and his career in the sacred cosmos is seriously undermined. The biographers tell several stories in which Francis uncovered a special affection he had for a wooden cup he had carved, a blanket he slept under, and the like (*2Celano*: 97; *Perugia*: 50; *1Celano*: 52). His response was immediate and final. As soon as he caught his affection for a material object compromising his participation in the sacred world, he destroyed it. "All that which hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess . . . will become bitter and unbearable." The price for extended periods in the ecstasy of perfect joy was eternal vigilance over his conscious states. Only by monitoring his feelings was he able to catch himself in the act of

forgetting. Thus his answer to the bishop declared, in effect: "Since I cannot attend both to my awareness and to my possessions, the possessions will have to go."

In his poverty, therefore, Francis was depriving himself of nothing he wanted. He was avoiding distractions, and the most seductive of distractions are the ones that slip past our censors so that we find ourselves miles away from our goal, traveling in the wrong direction, and wondering how we got there. Poverty is a tool for dropping from our lives the clutter that keeps us unfocused. As soon as we have no possessions to keep an eye on, we are alone with our feelings and reactions. Attending to them reveals us to ourselves. It is not what we are carrying in our hands that is important, but how we feel about it, what it means to us. We rarely know what things mean to us, for it is generally only after we have lost them that we begin to explore our attachments. Usually it feels as though we have lost a part of ourselves. Until that sinking feeling overcomes us, we remain ignorant of how much of ourselves we had invested.

Francis was determined to invest nothing of himself in the world of space and time. Even the act of soaking beans overnight so that they would be ready for the next day's meal entangled the friars in providing for the future. He forbade the practice and asked them to beg only for what they would need today, to let tomorrow take care of itself (*Perugia*: 4). Left to its own devices, our ego is bound to start planning, reviewing the pantry shelves, sketching out tonight's dinner and tomorrow's breakfast. All of this entangles us in a world where we are providing for ourselves as though there were no "other world" to consider. Francis used poverty as a means to frustrate the ego's obsessions with security and material comfort.

Because the ego's tendency is always to rely on itself, to entangle itself in questions of material comfort, and to close off an open future with its incessant planning, Francis deliberately employed poverty to frustrate those entangling tendencies. Having no possessions with which to make plans, he had nothing to distract him from discovering the next day's portion of manna. Tomorrow always brings something, and to Francis' way of seeing things, whatever the morrow brings is a gift from God. The unplanned life, therefore, is lived under the guidance of the God who lavishly provides for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.[1]

Having learned to distrust his ego through the *sadhana* of poverty, Francis devised further means to rein it in, and to keep himself in a state of mental receptivity. For example, when he confronted the question of whether he should devote his life to meditation or to preaching, he did not trust himself to discern God's will but asked Clare and Brother Silvester to pray over the question and let him know what they took God's will to be. They both determined that God wanted Francis to preach; and, although his own inclination was to pray, he immediately accepted their judgment, confident that it was God's will and not his own (*Flowers*: 16). Similarly, after resigning his office as Minister General of the Order, he addressed his replacement with these words: "I wish always to have at my side one of my companions who will represent your authority for me and whom I shall obey as if I were obeying you" (*Perugia*: 106). To answer to another's will is to by-pass one's own, to train oneself to listen and to respond. For God's will guides the sacred cosmos, and following it fills the spiritual practitioner with perfect joy.

Moving Between the Two Worlds

Francis' last attempt to introduce the spirit of his mystical practice into the Franciscan Rule was his "Testament," written to be a non-binding adjunct to the official document. He wanted his spiritual sons and daughters to know something about the course of his experience, how he learned the will of God experimentally -- by taking action and then paying attention to how that action changed his consciousness. In its opening words, Francis' "Testament" describes the heart of that *sadhana*, the transition from the conventional world to the sacred cosmos:

This is how God inspired me, Brother Francis, to embark upon a life of penance. When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me. After that I did not wait long before leaving the world (Frugoni, 1998: 22).

What I have been calling the *sadhana* of poverty, Francis calls "a life of penance." Similarly, "in sin" means living in the conventional world, and "leaving the world" means entering the sacred cosmos. In these four sentences, Francis describes the crucial experience that taught him how to leave the world.

He paid attention to disturbing emotions, the fact that the sight of lepers nauseated him *beyond measure*. The extreme force of this reaction suggests that the reality of lepers was one of the points at which the everyday world threatened to fracture and fall apart for Francis. He wanted to suppress this panic, put it out of his mind for good. "But then God led me into their company." He fails to tell us precisely how he was led or what made him think God was behind it. He must have experienced an urgency moving him, more powerful and with a different style than his own familiar will-power. It was taking him in so loathsome a direction that he lost control of his nausea reflex. Something moved him so strongly that either he *could* not resist or else he found to his surprise that he *no longer wished* to do so.

When he found he had pity on the lepers, we know he was no longer thinking primarily of himself and his own safety and comfort. He saw human beings who were suffering, and suddenly the world- and self-fragmenting nature of leprosy had a human face and lost its uncanny threat. Even more: associating with lepers turned out to be "a source of spiritual and physical consolation." What had horrified him became "sweet."

We know very well that when we conquer a long-time irrational fear and find that what had occasioned such horror and revulsion is really no match for us, we become charged with power. It is as though we had stored up enough energy to defeat a dragon, but it turned out to be a mouse. All the left-over energy is immediately converted to joy and exaltation. We make a sudden emotional transition from being unrealistically timorous to being over-confident. Our new attitude is no more dependable than our old one. It just feels a lot better. Therefore, when Francis attends to the reactions of his body-and-mind and learns that opposing a repugnance in the conventional world can lead to a powerful joy, we might wonder about that consolation. Was it an illusory "inflation" of his ego, a self-deceptive experience of grandiosity? Or was it a genuine discovery that bears no comparison with the emotional ups and downs of ordinary people like ourselves?

He gives us only one indication: "After that I did not wait long before leaving the world." First, he waited. He must have pondered the elation he felt upon gaining the acquaintance of the lepers. Indeed, it must have surprised him a great deal and even been confusing. He probably wanted to know how trustworthy it was. Could a whole life-strategy be based on opposing one's uncanny feelings of conventional disgust? Evidently it did not take him long to determine that it could. Apparently the difference between the everyday experience of narcissistic grandiosity and Francis' "spiritual and physical consolation" is that our common neurotic experience has no discernible future while Francis' did.

In the grip of grandiosity, we are filled with the elation of an illusory power and may even think we are so clever that the rest of our life ought to flow smoothly and confidently -- as though there will never be another obstacle for us. At the same time, however, we have no specific notion about *how* these wonderful things are going to happen. We envision no real future, we are just lost in an unfocussed glow. Francis, on the other hand, appears to have glimpsed an alternate plan of life and an alternate world of experience. Evidently he has seen that the disturbing emotions that arise in the conventional world can function as portals through which the sacred universe can be gained. He has learned that a way of life is possible in which he stays alert for such disturbing emotions and then opposes his natural tendency to suppress them and run away. The gateway to the alternate cosmos is right there where it is least expected, in the pain, humiliation, and disgust of everyday.

The exemplary nature of Francis' life convinces us that the alternate cosmos he preferred to our world was no neurotic escape. As a world-construction it was superior to most. But his words imply that he never experienced himself as the constructor of that sacred cosmos. He does not know exactly *why* he visited those lepers. Something unconscious and foreign to his everyday ego moved him in a new direction, and his eyes were opened. When he glimpsed the sacred new world-construction, the vision confirmed hopes so wild he never knew he had had them. There was nothing to debate. He had to leave the world he shared with the rest of us. He had seen that the kingdom of heaven was a reality, *the* reality. He left our world without regret.

Experiments in Poverty

Except for the expression, "then God himself led me into their company," Francis' encounter with the lepers surely appears to be an experiment. Some unconscious impulse led him heroically to oppose his nausea. He then observed his reactions and made the discovery of his life. In this instance, at least, Francis discovered himself to be an intelligent pawn in God's experiment rather than himself the author of his daring move. But according to his biographers, it was not always so.

Indeed, it seems likely that the experiment with the lepers had been in Francis' mind for some time. The three companions of his earliest days tell us, for instance, that before "leaving the world" but during the time when he was seeking rundown churches and other out of the way places in which to pray he went through a period of exuberant fantasizing and painful inhibition. He imagined experiments in sainthood that he thought he would love to perform -- if only he could step out of his familiar surroundings to a place where no one knew him.

He was still living in the world though already greatly changed by divine grace; and sometimes the longing seized him for a place where, as an unknown stranger, he could give his own clothes to some beggar, taking the beggar's miserable rags in exchange and setting out himself to beg for the love of God (*3Comps*: 10).

Thomas of Celano says that Francis actually tried this experiment while on a pilgrimage to Rome: "Many times he would have done the same thing had he not been held back by shame before those who knew him" (*2Celano*: 8).

Probably Francis spent some weeks or months after the numinous leper incident day-dreaming of saintly exploits. Formerly he had day-dreamed of knightly deeds of derring-do, but now the emotional values have been reversed. When he was "in sin," romantic fantasies of knights made him feel good about himself. But these new day-dreams were different. He had learned that the most disturbing emotions -- shame and disgust -- could be portals to the sacred cosmos. So he set out bravely in his day-dreams to begin his experiments in poverty. As a beggar, he thought, he would finally be able to hold the sacred cosmos steady. He was on the verge, again, of that "certain exquisite joy" (*1Celano*: 10). But each time he found himself brought up short by shame. The tiny hole between the worlds consists of the emotion most consistently linked with the fragmentation of the self.

Each experiment to establish the sacred cosmos through acts of radical poverty came up against his shame. The doorway to the other world had posted a guard that was too powerful and too wily to be defeated once and for all. For even after he had taken the plunge and "left the world" in the sense that he had begun to beg for his food as well as for the stones he needed to rebuild the rundown church of San Damiano, he still had to confront his shame on a daily basis. Thus, while begging oil for the lamps of that church he had to pass through a large group of men to gain access to the house where he hoped to obtain a donation. The sight of the men filled him with "bashfulness," and he almost gave up his intention. Then he had to wrestle with the issue of his cowardice, turn himself around and go back, where he:

freely explained the cause of his bashfulness; and, in a kind of spiritual intoxication, he begged in French for oil and got it. Most fervently he stirred up everyone for the work of that church and speaking in a loud voice in French, he prophesied before all that there would be a monastery there of holy virgins of Christ (*2Celano*: 13).

The "prophecy" refers to the fact that several years later San Damiano became the home of St. Clare and her "Poor Ladies." Francis' speaking in French is a much more problematic issue. Some say his mother was French and he learned an elegant French from her, though there is no evidence to support this claim. Others suggest that he learned a serviceable French from his father who often traveled to France on business. But it is hard to doubt the word of Francis' three early companions, who say that French was "a language he delighted to speak, though he did not know it very well" (*3Comps*: 10). Because no biographer reports that Francis' Italian countrymen failed to understand him on account of his outbursts of French, it seems probable that he spoke a Franco-Italian composite language, such as the traveling drama troops, jugglers, and troubadours used so that they could be understood pretty well in every town, without having to learn all the local dialects -- a language "spoken nowhere and yet understood by all" (Englebert, 1979: 13).

Whatever the quality of the French, however, Celano clearly implies that Francis spoke the language when he was intoxicated with God; and this implicit claim is weakly supported by other biographers, who describe him gaily singing in French while traveling with his companions. Probably he spoke and sang in French during those periods when he became -- vividly in his own mind -- a gay troubadour for God, overcoming his shame at his eccentricities by playing the role of the saint he hoped to become. Whether he did so willfully or as the result of a trance-like intoxication with God, it is not always easy to decide. But it seems likely that he sometimes deliberately pushed the envelope in an attempt to escape from the conventional world and enter another, larger domain. For just as the Holy Roman Empire was German, but had French as its court language, so Francis sought to speak the lingo of a higher plane. A rise in the earthly hierarchy from the rude local dialect to the universal court language apparently symbolized for Francis the noble virtues of loyalty and courage that every knight was expected to display. Changing his language, therefore, may have been another technique of ecstasy for changing the world.[2]

In the oil-begging episode, French-speaking is a symptom of divine intoxication, the effectiveness of which is indicated by a return of Francis' courage and then the influence his intoxication has upon his listeners. And it is evident that he induced this world-altering ecstasy through his struggle with disturbing emotions: an initial bashfulness, the cowardice of turning back, the shame it caused, and then facing the crowd of men in a truly humiliating manner. For in "freely explaining the cause of his bashfulness," he lays everything before those men. He reserves no secrets about his eccentric motives, his deliberate beggarly status, his intimidation at the thought of their disapproval, and by implication the grandiose plan of sainthood that lies behind it all. The world-changing ecstasy occurs as powerfully as it does because his confrontation with his shadowy emotions has been so thorough. He enters an altered state of consciousness and begins to speak as though he is on stage. He speaks of the humiliation he has brought down on himself by exposing his own secrets. But he does so in an ecstasy of perfect joy.

Further Uses of Shame

Francis' mystical practice of attending to his conscious states did not necessarily end at the point that he faced down his shame and squeezed through into the sacred cosmos. A number of stories indicate that he continued to attend to his feelings even after slipping through the gap between the worlds. He is said, for example, to have detected "vainglory" after giving his mantle to an old woman (*2Celano* : 132; *Perugia* : 41). The self-congratulation of vainglory recreates the world of public opinion and makes the sacred world vanish. Pride reconstitutes the everyday ego. Narcissistic emotions banish the sacred cosmos.[3] There is nothing for Francis to do but to confront his vainglory; and he does so immediately and in a manner that courts powerful feelings of shame. He confesses his unworthy and anti-saintly state of inflation to everyone who will listen. Again he publicly abases himself upon seeing that he has missed an opportunity to reverse his consciousness and "leave the world." It might be considered a masochistic move, in that Francis derives pleasure from the act of publicly humiliating himself. But if so, we would expect to find a shrillness in the emotion of shame, that give-away trait of a neurotic reaction. We would expect no insight into the nature of shame, no sorting out of types of shame. Francis, however, made himself an expert in shame.

He taught his followers the technique of attending to their shame, saying that "shame is the enemy of salvation" and that they should not be "confused by shame" (*2Celano*: 71). Shame confuses because it obliterates the sacred plane while re-establishing the conventional world. On the other hand, one might legitimately be ashamed to "preach penance," i.e., the *sadhana* of poverty, knowing that one is "ignorant and of no account." Although this is a realistic shame, in that no one is worthy of preaching penance, one must not give in to it but rather use it to remind oneself that, in preaching, one is merely God's instrument. One must be willing to "suffer [insult and injury] humbly and patiently" while trusting in God -- that greater agency that takes over when one's egohood has been set aside (*3Comps*: 36). When his companions came back from begging and were happily joking and vying with one another over who had gathered the richest supply, "Blessed Francis rejoiced to see them gay and happy" (*Perugia*: 3). He saw that they had broken through the shame barrier and inhabited the realm of that "certain exquisite joy" that betokens the sacred cosmos. In his spiritual guidance, he monitored their feelings in the same manner that he attended to his own.

Shame can also function as a hindrance to spiritual progress and was therefore not always to be confronted directly. For example, new recruits to the Order were not sent out to beg immediately, for "they would blush" (*Perugia*: 3). Thus in the beginning Francis did all the begging himself and later on monitored the progress of novices to see when they were firm enough in their psychological and spiritual development to be able to take on the shame of begging. He also perceived that the community of friars constituted its own form of the consensual world, where expectations regarding the rigors of poverty and fasting were much more stringent than those of the larger public. This placed his friars under extraordinary pressure to deny their everyday needs. Therefore when he found a brother who was "dying of hunger" due to his zeal in fasting, Francis roused the entire community in the middle of the night and got everyone eating so that the undernourished brother would be able to eat what he needed and "would not blush" (*Perugia*: 1). On another occasion, he took an old, sick brother to a vineyard and began eating grapes himself "so that the brother would not be ashamed to eat them alone" (*Perugia*: 5). He forbade a scrupulous brother to confess his sins, "because his shame at confessing them every day aggravated his torment" (*Perugia*: 7).

Finally, shame may occur when one is already inhabiting the sacred domain, where the narcissistic emotion may operate as a warning against complacency.

I am greatly ashamed when I meet someone poorer than myself. I chose holy poverty and made her my Lady, my delight, my spiritual and temporal treasure. God and all mankind know that I profess poverty. I ought to blush for shame when I meet someone poorer than myself (*Perugia*: 88).

We might rephrase this confession as follows. The *sadhana* of poverty is like wooing a beautiful woman. When you bring her flowers every day and do what you believe to be your utmost to make her happy, you may feel good about your relationship. But the day you discover that someone else has planted a flower garden in her backyard and tends it beautifully, you realize there is more that you could have been doing. You have unconsciously set a limit to your devotion, and this has allowed another suitor to put you to shame. Francis speaks similarly when he says to his followers, "I wish to be filled with shame before you if at any time I do nothing of these three things": thinking, speaking, and doing what is holy (*2Celano*: 159).

Narcissism and Sainthood

Freud coined the term "narcissism" in reference to the Greek myth of Narcissus and the tall flower usually found bending over its reflection in a pool or stream. Freud meant to imply a love of oneself, the image of Narcissus, who drowned trying to reach the watery young man of his reflection. He had fallen in love with himself while believing his beloved to be a stranger.

When Francis caught himself indulging in vainglory after giving his mantle to the old woman, he was horrified to discover that he was loving himself. The ideal of giving things away "for the love of God" had served only as a self-deceptive cover to hide the fact that he was redirecting the glory to himself. Libido from the unconscious, ostensibly aroused by a desire to practice the *sadhana* of poverty for the love of God, had "cathected" his ego -- had attached itself to his ego, as to a beloved. What inwardly felt like love for another was in fact nothing more than love of himself.

Libido from our unconscious *must* attach itself to the ego if we are to have sufficient self-respect to lead a normal life. But when we cannot escape a pre-occupation with ourselves, narcissism has become a problem. Francis seems to have grasped this principle when he selected shame as the primary emotion to monitor in his spiritual practice. For shame is the emotion that betrays substantial loss of self-esteem. Francis kept his novices back from a direct challenge to the shame that would surely have been provoked by their going out to beg before they had developed a healthy level of self-esteem in their new identity as friars. He knew some "ego-building" was required.

Shame inspires us all to do our best to win the applause of society. It makes us feel worthless and drives us to do all we can to garner social approval in hopes that the praise of others will compensate for the self-regard we cannot muster within ourselves. As such it is the enemy of anyone who wants to make a transit between worlds. Shame and its narcissistic solution, striving for the praise of others, anchors the world of public opinion and blocks our way elsewhere. When Francis was "still in sin," he appears to have been primarily interested in winning the regard of his partying comrades, the bourgeois twenty-somethings of Assisi in the first decade of the thirteenth century. Because he had a reputation for knowing how to throw a party, his neurotic solution was probably successful. He was probably too happily popular to have any reason to notice the central dishonesty in his life. He was striving for applause because something was gravely amiss. Whatever came before his world-changing encounter with the lepers, it must have involved an honest look at the dread lurking below his gaiety and pretense. At bottom, Francis became a saint because he dared to acknowledge his narcissism, honestly assess what he saw, and institute a life-long series of experiments to challenge its hold on his consciousness.

Narcissistic issues have to do with the stability of the personality as a whole, the "self," a much larger reality than the ego. The fragility of narcissism, the tendency to fear I am worthless, empty at the core, and split into fragments by powerful emotions may then be described as symptoms of a self that lacks coherent structure. [4] Beneath every well-functioning ego, there must be a coherently structured self providing a floor of stability.

Because none of us is immune to moments -- or even lengthy episodes -- in which the floor of stability seems to have been pulled out from under us, no one can boast of a fully integrated and coherent self-structure. Under the right conditions any of us can fall into the confusion of shame, become inflated with feelings of grandiosity, nauseated with disgust, carried away from ourselves by lust, or otherwise devastated by uncontrollable emotion. While our habitual integration will be sufficient for most occasions, under the right provocation any of us can fall apart. Whether well or poorly integrated, each of us has a narcissistic flaw in our self-structure.

Flirting with Dissolution

Although Francis surely lacked a language to talk about these things, it seems evident that he knew the central principle very well. He found the frenetic effort to win social acclaim to be hollow and changed tactics. He replaced the applause of his comrades with a strategy of biblical experiments, exchanging clothes with beggars in foreign locales, where the shame factor was substantially reduced. Here, he found that shame -- that is to say, narcissism -- was the issue. However biblically inspired the stunts he contrived, he was always stuck fast in the conventional world by his dread of what people might say. He could not escape from the neurotic strategy of narcissism, which reasserted itself under all conditions.

In the first phase of his life, when he was "in sin," he was driven by a fear of narcissistic crisis. He was running from shame. The second stage began when he tried to redirect his course through biblical experiments but discovered that shame was still the obstacle. Here, he tried to outsmart shame by choosing foreign locales for his experiments. The third stage of his life, the point he describes as "leaving the world," began with a crucial reversal of his mindset. Instead of trying to run from shame or to outsmart it, he took shame as his advisor. He found that deeply disturbing narcissistic emotions were always located at cross-over points between the worlds, just where most of us turn tail and run. It is terrifying to contemplate the dissolution of the self I have always known as well as the world it has constructed. But for a new world and a new self to come into existence, the old must disintegrate. In his confrontation with shame, Francis discovered he had to allow his "sinful" self and the "sinful" world to fall apart and disappear so that a new experimental self could assemble itself in the sacred cosmos.

Because my narcissistic wound is the place where the coherence of self and of world is fatally challenged, it is the point where I feel absolutely powerless. There is nothing I, the conscious ego, can do about the unintegrated and incoherent sector of my self. I am certainly unable to hold it together, for it is more comprehensive than I. The self is what holds *me* together, if anything does. I can try to distract myself from the crisis by stirring up applause -- i.e., splitting the problem off from consciousness -- but ultimately I am helpless. My best hope is to stop trying to control the situation and wait to see what happens. If my self is not too deeply flawed -- and chances are it is not -- I will shortly learn that it has the capacity to pull me together on its own.

A dissociation will not be healed by being split off, but by more complete disintegration. All the powers that strive for unity, all healthy desire for selfhood, will resist the disintegration, and in this way he will become conscious of the possibility of an inner integration, which before he had

always sought outside himself. He will then find his reward in an undivided self (Jung, 1926: ¶334).

The great lesson in Jung's life occurred a few years before he wrote these lines. The break-up with Freud had opened his narcissistic wound, bringing on psychotic-like symptoms that lasted several years. He had to remind himself frequently of his identity, family, and responsibilities in hopes of keeping one foot in the conventional world. Although he felt in danger of entering the psychotic world forever, he did not directly fight the process. He tried to learn from the powerful dream-like fantasies he was having. Eventually, about six years before writing the passage quoted above, he found that his psyche pulled itself back together again, with renewed direction and greater creativity. Out of this experience, he developed his theory of the self as the psyche's ultimate principle of organization (Jung, 1961: 170-99).

The remarkable thing is that Francis seems to have learned pretty much the same lesson. For his *sadhana* consisted in attending to states of consciousness that signaled the immanent dissolution of self-and-world. He had learned that what supported the "world of sin" was any denial of an impending narcissistic crisis. He kept himself on guard to resist his natural inclination to flee from any shameful truth about himself. His great reversal began by acknowledging the emotion that posed the existential threat. He confessed it to himself and to his associates, and kept it fully in mind while he carried out the experiment that had provoked it. He found that entering right into his shame brought about "a more complete disintegration" and enabled "an inner integration, which before he had always sought outside himself." Shame broke up the coherence of the old self-structure, the one that had constructed the "world of sin"; and after the catastrophe a new self-and-world assembled itself. He passed through a gap between the worlds and found himself in the sacred cosmos.

Break-through into the kingdom of God was by no means a once-and-for-all achievement. The story of Francis' vainglory hints at the instability of the other world. For the moment he notices the poverty/shame gambit has succeeded, vainglory overtakes his consciousness and re-establishes the narcissistic defense. Francis is immediately drawn back into our world. There must sometimes have been quite a see-saw battle between mystic desire and narcissistic terror. Therefore, once he had discovered shame to be the portal into the other world, the new task of his *sadhana* had to be achieving *stability* in the sacred cosmos, acquiring the ability to stay there for longer and longer periods without interruption. In his eyes, his "sinfulness" was precisely the narcissistic impurity of his intentions, the fact that shame and grandiosity appeared at the slightest provocation and terminated the experiment. Francis is reported to have bemoaned this inconstancy in himself: "It seems to me that I am the greatest of sinners, for if God had treated any criminal with such great mercy, he would have been ten times more spiritual than I" (*2Celano*: 123).[5]

Life is potentially a dialogue with God. God treats him with great mercy -- introduces him to lepers -- and Francis performs an experiment, kisses a leper's hand and feels an exquisite joy (*3Comps* : 11). If only he could dwell calmly in that joy without all the narcissistic rumbles. "Any criminal" would be "ten times more spiritual" because Francis regrets the countless lapses he has everyday. This is not false humility. Because he constantly monitors his states of consciousness, he knows very well how many opportunities he has missed or terminated prematurely. When Francis speaks of sin, he does not refer to some crime he may have committed. Sin is lapsing narcissistically from the world in which

he dialogues with God.

Sainthood and Heroism

A hero risks pain and possibly life itself to bring us some boon. Perhaps a life is saved or a foreign invader defeated. A mythic hero, like the Egyptian Osiris, dwelt on earth in an eternal era before time as we know it had come to exist. There he defeated his destructive evil twin, Set, and taught the ancestors of historical Egyptians the ways of agriculture and civilization, establishing a paradisaal kingdom that served as a model for all temporal life to follow. Ordinary time began only after Osiris and his fellow gods had left this world forever.

The heroism of Francis of Assisi falls somewhere between that of the divine Osiris and that of the recent newspaper hero who saved someone from flames or undertow. According to his early biographers, his life so closely followed the model of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, that he showed us what it means to live the life of Christianity's mythic hero -- not in mythic time but right here in "ordinary time." After his death, hagiographic accounts elevated him and his *sadhana* of poverty to so lofty and mythic a sphere that Francis himself had become nearly a god, a superhero whose extraordinary gifts make his emulation a compelling ideal but not a realistic possibility.

In his heroism, Francis defeated no dragons, converted no Muslims, and unseated no rampaging knights. His battles were entirely of a different sort, as Bonaventure prayerfully reflects:[6]

In the excess of his indescribable fervor, he did not even hesitate to kiss their ulcerous sores . . . He would expose himself to every kind of indignity, that he might bring his rebellious lower nature into subjection to the rule of the spirit; so he would gain complete control of himself and be at peace, once he had subdued the enemy that was part of his own nature (*MinLife*: I, 8).

The enemy, "his rebellious lower nature," the evil twin inside, the son of Pietro reassembled himself and the consensual world every time he found himself disturbed by a narcissistic emotion. Meanwhile, Brother Francis the religious hero and Friar Minor strove to live in the spiritual world and attempted to do so by cultivating peace. He would be "in control of himself" when he had overcome his sensitivity to narcissistic emotions, when he could face down anxiety, disgust, shame, vainglory, and the like, without losing his joyous participation in the kingdom of heaven. The utter imperturbability he sought was difficult -- if not impossible -- to sustain. Therefore, the *sadhana* of imperturbability consisted in further experiments in standing up to disturbing emotions. Catching a wave of disgust rising within, he kissed the leper's oozing sores while bathing and bandaging him. He remained on the look-out for emotions that attached him to our world in hopes of passing through them peacefully. He sought to draw the leper's sore and its pus into his ecstatic cosmos instead of having them stir up a narcissistic crisis to pull him back here.

Francis' heroic battle with his narcissistic sensitivity resembles the followers of Shiva who deliberately seek out the disturbing emotions of disgust, dread, and lust in order to transcend them. A female guru from the city of Varanasi, in the early twentieth century says, "To train the tiger one must be close to the tiger" (Battacharya, 1988: 325). The tiger is our overwhelming susceptibility to the narcissistic emotions. As long as we succumb, we remain

in the world of every day. Shiva "teaches man to disregard human laws in order to discover divine laws" (Daniélou, 1992: 15). He wants us to embrace reality without illusions. Because the world of the public consensus is filled with pretense and hypocrisy, the ecstatic hero faces up to the turbulent emotions that drive these vices.

The nineteenth century Bengali saint, Ramakrishna, found himself liberated when he could no longer distinguish between the tastes of sandalwood paste and his own feces. In his ecstasy he passed peacefully through disgust. Consequently, his hold on the sacred world was imperturbable (Kripal, 1995: 268). Along the same lines, Alexandra David-Neel tells a story about a Tibetan guru who claimed that enlightenment occurs when one can roll "in impurity like a pig and fashion stars out of dog dung" (David-Neel, 1971: 7). Summarizing the significance of such reports, Eliade says, "Assimilating every kind of filth makes the mind capable of any and every meditation" (Eliade, 1969: 297). The meditation that brings the sacred world to presence only persists as long as Francis can remain undisturbed by any form of disgust, shame, or vainglory. The narcissistic emotions are his "dog dung," the shadow of his sainthood and the nearly "tantric" secret behind his techniques of ecstasy.

The *Sadhana* of Imperturbability

The German Franciscan scholar, Octavian Schmucki, lists eight examples from the early biographies that demonstrate Francis had "a zealously sensitive nature and a sensibility easily aroused" which prompted him to impetuous acts driven by overwhelming emotions (Schmucki, 1991: 113-118). These examples imply that Francis must have spent a good deal of his time teetering on the edge of narcissistic crisis:

- He cursed friars who dishonored holy religion by their evil deeds and example (*2Celano*: 156)
- He threatened a friar who blackened the reputation of another with severe punishment, involving humiliation and a beating at the hands of a friar known as "the Florentine pugilist" (*2Celano*: 182).
- He issued a peremptory command that the friars immediately leave the house of studies erected at Bologna (*2Celano*: 58).
- He flew into anger and began tearing down with his own hands a building constructed by the citizens of Assisi for yearly Franciscan chapter meetings (*2Celano*: 57).
- He was subject to frequent weeping for the sufferings of Christ and his mother (e.g., *2Celano*: 200).
- He often rose from prayer with his eyes red from weeping (*3Comps*: 14).
- He refused to stop weeping when doctors urged him to do so in order to save the health of his eyes (*MajLife*: V, 8).
- He was subject to frequent and sudden transitions between the emotional poles of joy

and sorrow, praise and compassion, and the like, a narcissistic symptom that Object Relations theorists call "splitting" and which Jung calls "*enantiodromia*" (e.g., *2Celano*: 127).

The kinds of incident listed above suggest an individual who delighted in his emotional life. This seems particularly true of the three items involving weeping -- where it must be noted that the sufferings of Christ and his mother unquestionably belonged to the sacred cosmos. When the bible stories had become that real and present for Francis, he had to have been in an ecstatic state. And since it was his object to live entirely in the kingdom of heaven as Jesus had, we can hardly be surprised that he found the sacrifice of his earthly sight a small price to pay for other-worldly vision.

Four of the eight items, however, involve outbursts of anger over incidents that imply a compromise with his *sadhana* of poverty and its goal of "leaving the world": owning buildings at Bologna and Assisi, and unworthy behavior on the part of some of his friars. These are outburst of emotion that unquestionably held him in the consensual world, and which his own words condemn. For example, in "Admonition XI" to his friars, he says, "A religious lives a good life and avoids sin when he is never angry or disturbed at anything" (Habig, 1983: 82). And in a letter to an unknown superior of a Franciscan province who was so upset at the sinful behavior of one of his friars that he desired to give up his post and retire to a hermitage, Francis gives a good deal of advice which supports the *sadhana* of imperturbability but which he did not always follow himself. Above all, he tells the superior, he should not desire that the situation be any different than it is, nor expect it to change. Rather he should love the sinful friar despite all, and accept this trial as a more valuable spiritual exercise than retirement to a hermitage. The miscreant should receive nothing but mercy and forgiveness from his superior (Habig, 1983: 110f). In short, Francis recognized that the superior was confronted with a narcissistic challenge, and that to learn to deal with his frustration and disgust imperturbably -- so that his "perfect joy" not be disturbed -- that was the holy *sadhana* God had prepared for him.

It is hardly surprising that Francis sometimes -- or even often -- failed to live up to the standards he set himself. This, indeed, is why he calls himself "the greatest of sinners." The central point is that narcissism was more dangerous an issue for Francis than it is for many of us. He was often overwhelmed with emotion, which is why his choice of *sadhana* was so appropriate. He worked with what life gave him, his volatile nature, and sought not to suppress its volatility but to enter into those emotions and learn to pass through them imperturbably.

There is, for example, a story from late in his life where he again reveals that he has been disturbed by the sight of lepers. He asks Brother James not to offend the public by taking them out of the hospital where people would be sure to see them, and then is horrified at himself for injuring the lepers' feelings. He confesses this sin to Peter of Catanii, the Minister General of the Order, and asks Peter not to object to his own devised penance, which is to eat with the lepers from the same dish (*Perugia*: 22; *Mirror*: 58). Since people ate with their fingers in the thirteenth century, he was planning to eat blood and pus from the lepers' sores along with his food. He had proved unable to deal imperturbably with the disgusting sight of lepers, so he set himself a more harrowing experiment. He was determined to pass through his disgust in the state of perfect joy.

At the time of this incident, he had been devising experiments to humble his grandiosity and shame for nearly twenty years; and just like the rest of us, it was still a struggle for him. Clearly he had grasped that sainthood is not an achievement but always an on-going process. The *sadhana* of imperturbability functions here, as well. For it is significant that after twenty years of practice his continuing disgust at the sight of lepers does not provoke a narcissistic crisis over the failure of his sainthood project. The dialogue with God goes on. He patiently performs a new experiment in imperturbability.

Possibly the best indication that he had learned something permanent from this practice can be found in his changed relationship with "Brother Body" -- formerly known as "Brother Ass." His early companions tell us that from the hour the wooden Christ spoke to him in the rundown chapel of San Damiano, "He mortified his body most harshly, not only when he was well, but also when he was ill . . . so much so, that on his deathbed he confessed to having sinned grievously against Brother Body" (*3Comps*: 14). He seems to have learned that while his body is both "this lump of flesh,"[7] and the whole complex of issues that anchors him in the conventional world, it is also much more than that. It is the instrument by which he performs the experiments of his *sadhana*. Brother Body is the vehicle that carries him between the worlds. The body remains an adversary, but a respected one: a recalcitrant worthy opponent for his idealistic and ecstatic identity. The battle between these two -- the light and dark twins of his being -- comprises the very means of consciousness changing.

His zeal in the raw, early days, his desire to disown his recalcitrant tendencies, caused him to see his body as the enemy. And his maturity is suggested by the fact that he "reproved his brothers when they were too harsh on themselves . . . binding up their wounds with the bandages of sane precepts and directions" (*3Comps*: 59). Though he is sometimes reported to have worn a hairshirt in the early days, he forbade such traditional devices be used by his friars (*Perugia*: 2).

Even as "Brother Ass," however, his body was at least a tireless and plodding vehicle, a hard worker but a slow one. Thus after perhaps a dozen years of experiments in poverty, he had begun to grasp the fact that the slowness and plodding were not due merely to his lump of flesh. They had to do with the more volatile, narcissistic sector of his psyche, the likely origin of his holy aspirations. He had arrived at a position outside of traditional rules about what constitutes holiness. In his late advice to Brother Leo, he makes it clear that it is not biblical models, ecclesiastical prescriptions, or even Franciscan tradition that describes the path. Rather, the path is constructed anew in every moment through a dialogue with God: "In whatever way it seems best to you to praise the Lord God, to follow in His footsteps and His poverty, do this with the blessing of God and my obedience" (Armstrong & Brady, 1982: 48). "In whatever way seems best to you": there are no rules for all situations. The practitioner of poverty is conducting a dialogue with God. The right thing to do is learned anew in every moment.

1. In "Admonition II" to his friars, Francis says, "For the person eats of the tree of knowledge of good and evil who appropriates to himself his own will and thus exults himself over the good things which the Lord says and does in him" (Armstrong & Brady, 1982: 27).
2. Regarding the link between intoxication and speaking a "second language," I have noted that I do much better in my second language after I have had a glass of wine.
3. He expressed the lesson he learned from this experiment in "Admonition XVII": "Blessed is that servant who does not pride himself on the good that the Lord says or does through him any more than on what He says or does through another" (Armstrong & Brady, 1982: 32f).
4. Cf. the work of Heinz Kohut, e.g. Kohut (1977).
5. Francis recommended this sentiment to his friars in "Admonition V": "All the creatures under heaven, each according to his nature, serve, know, and obey their Creator better than you" (Armstrong & Brady, 1982: 29).
6. Bonaventure's *MinLife* was written as an addition to the Divine Office, which is sometimes called the "Prayer of the Church." Every Roman Catholic priest is obliged to recite it every day.
7. A common Buddhist expression.