

**Sacred Hospitality:
The dia-Logos of Love**
Fr. Stephen Muse, PhD

Preamble

One evening at supper during the initial COVID lockdown, as Claudia and I were remembering events from our 40 years together, tears began to run quietly down our faces. We continued sharing memories and reflections, pausing at times in shared stillness, waiting for other intimations to float up from the silence and enter the space of presence that had been created between us. The poignancy of it was such that at one point I said, “I think we are attending each other’s funeral before we have died.” She smiled through the tears and managed to quietly say, “I think we are.”

Face-to-face presence at the altar of the heart—aware of our mortality, with gratitude and in wonder before the sheer *givenness* of life, without pressure or the need to make anything happen, shared together without judgment or complaint, with one who is irreplaceable—is the territory of healing encounters. Although they unfold differently within a variety of boundaries, they all share the same basic ingredients.

Theological Foundations

St. John the Theologian defines the eucharistic reciprocity of the healing encounter very simply. “God *is* love and we love who have *first been* loved.”¹ This love is the Uncut cornerstone upon which the entire Body of Christ is knit together. Christ’s apophatic presence, however imperfectly realized, at the altar of the heart of a 40-year marriage, with an ordinary person who knows me better and has forgiven me more than anyone on the planet, is transformative. As St. Paul observes, God’s Grace is the active agent which proves “sufficient for us, for God’s strength (δύναμις) is revealed most perfectly in our helplessness (ἀσθενεία)” (2 Cor 12:9). By contrast, any form of power and control over the other, substituting what I think I already know, in place of naked presence before the unknown, eclipses the encounter.

All I have to offer you is my poverty

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus about what he needed for eternal life, beyond what he thought he had acquired by his own merit, it is said that Jesus looked at him and loved him. He told the young ruler to continue what he was doing and he would live. When the man persisted that he was in search of still greater depth, Jesus offered him a word: Let go of all you have acquired through these accomplishments, and put everything you are and have at the

¹ cf. 1 Jn. 4:10.

disposal of the commonwealth. Then, sheared of all self-esteem, “come and follow Me.” This was an invitation to an eternity of healing encounters at the altar of the heart.

This action of dispossession of the known and comfortable is involved in some way in every face-to-face encounter that moves into the liminal space of freedom to be noticed and to notice and not knowing any particular automatic agenda about what to do. Essayist Walker Percy asks,

Why is it that the look of another person looking at you is different from everything else in the Cosmos? That is to say, looking at lions or tigers or Saturn or the Ring Nebula or at an owl or at another person from the side is one thing, but finding yourself looking in the eyes of another person looking at you is something else. And why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone's finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?²

Because the look is the most intimate encounter with a living icon and ultimately of Christ at the depth, this look moves into the unconscious places of all our wounds: our unconfessed sins, our unworthiness, the memory of our injuries and the fear of the intensity of our unfulfilled longings. Everything is there, and when we begin to listen and give voice to this, the spontaneous arising of affect confirms the truth of being witnessed. This vulnerability causes anxiety to the conscious island of the “self.” This “unfelt known,” as Christopher Bollas calls it, stored in our neuropeptide systems and coming to us through non-verbal intuitive means, is a simultaneous encounter with the deeply familiar and the unknown. We sense this may occur as soon as we are present to one who is present to us in the ways we have described.

Once when I visited a monastery, one of the monks had come to discuss something with me. Unexpectedly, the Elder suddenly came into the residence where I was staying. The monk told me later that this almost never happens. We greeted each other briefly, as I had not seen him in some years, and the monk then asked him, “Is it blessed, Elder?” He gave his blessing and left. When I turned back to the monk, I wept and said, “All I have to offer you is my poverty.” In that moment I realized deeply once again how puny and arrogant before Christ is any presumption of privilege, however subtle, based on knowledge, training, position, or experiences that suggests otherwise. All self-esteem (*kenodoxia*) diminishes the healing encounter by substituting something I do or offer to a person without the mutual vulnerability of relationship that is given in and received through Christ—*dia-Logos* is the essence of the *koinonia* of the Church. For, as Christ tells His disciples, “Cut off from Me you can *do* nothing” (Jn 15:5).

Healing encounters are possible to the extent that we do not reduce people to the procrustean beds of diagnosis or trap them in unconscious passionate enactments which serve our personal or professional needs. Healing always occurs through right glorifying (*orthodoxia*) self-offering presence in response to the eternal divine Self-offering. This is in contrast to the

² Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*.

monologue of *kenodoxia* (empty glory) which directs, consumes, performs, and extracts from the other the narcissistic supplies needed to sustain the idol of self-love. No one but Christ is free of this. That is why spiritual fathers and mothers as well as confessors and attentive, experienced supervisors and mentors are so vital for supporting the lifetime formation and growth of psychosomatic unity anchored in the deep heart of persons who are on the path of becoming a healing presence through continual repentance.

Transformative healing encounters occur where the vertical axis of divine energies crosses the horizontal axis of our embodied life at the altar of the heart. This encounter unfolds existentially in historical (*chronos*) time, “wherever two or more are gathered in My Name,” as Christ put it. The opportune (*kairos*) event is ontological and may occur at any given moment. Christ says, “I am the door. If any person enters in [through Me] he shall be saved,” (Jn 10:9) and “I am the Way, the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn 14:6).

The ancient Greek inventor Archimedes is said to have boasted, “Give me a fixed point and a lever long enough, and I can move the world.” When considering healing encounters, St Gregory the Theologian’s theological observation of the Incarnation is the necessary fixed point. “Whatever has not been assumed cannot be healed.” Compassionate, shared vulnerability with the other’s life is essential to the healing encounter.

The lever is the combined action of the uncreated divine energies of the Holy Trinity and the created energies of human persons working together synergistically in the call and response which transforms and “moves the world.” Humanity cannot be spiritually healed or developmentally completed independent of God by any form of psychological technique or humanly derived science. Neither does God transform someone magically, through Communion or otherwise, without that person’s existential assent and participation.

The healing encounter unfolds across the theanthropic bridge of the Person of Christ who unites all persons in His Person. He is the “one offered and the one received” so that in the reciprocity of every encounter, the guest becomes the host. I have summarized the three dimensions of this synergy in what I call the dia-Logos prayer, a prayer of invocation, as well as a thanksgiving for the healing encounter which is beyond my ability to bring about.

Lord, love the other through me.
Let me love the other through You
And be loved by You through the other.

Life and Truth are more than words

After her fall down the rabbit hole, Alice discovered a character in Wonderland called Humpty Dumpty who spoke to her in a rather scornful tone, “*When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.*” In the best sense, the demand to “understand the words I use, exactly as I do and in no other way!” can be seen as a fervent desire to make ourselves known.

On the other hand, unless Humpty Dumpty has an equally fervent desire to comprehend and value the words of others, we may recognize in his insistence the image of the post-modern world of identity politics. Here an ideological wave of narcissistic, subjective identification with verbal formulations that are aligned with totalitarian ideologies is counterbalanced by an equally rigid, anxiety-driven, authoritarian ideological attachment to traditional forms. Counterbalancing each other in this polarized way, both extremes stridently refuse the dia-Logos of loving encounter at the altar of the heart, which necessarily involves the vulnerability of repentance, ascetical forbearance, mercy, wonder, and compassionate unknowing beyond words as a prerequisite for any kind of transformative encounter. Rabbi Abraham Heschel observes that “Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of what is,”³ and I would add, also, that continual repentance in Christ is a prerequisite.

It is vitally important point to recognize that Humpty Dumpty himself does not fully comprehend the depth of reality from which his own words arise. None of us do. Words are at best temporary metaphors used to translate the nonverbal noetic reality of our embodied existence and existential encounters. We always know more than we are able to verbalize. We think and feel more than we comprehend, and at all times and in all places, we encounter more than we can be aware of and experience. We need one encounter with one another to discover who we are. Healing encounters that prove transformative are in essence spiritual encounters, not yet fully comprehended and articulated. St Sophrony writes:

The human tongue has no words with which duly to express the life of the spirit—what is logically incomprehensible and inexpressible must be comprehended experientially. God is made known by faith and living communion, whereas human speech with all its relativity and fluidity opens the way to endless misunderstanding and objections.⁴

St Sophrony said it took him decades to formulate dogmatically the encounters he had with the Uncreated divine Light which he experienced beyond words and natural realities.

We should not quickly dismiss or react to another person’s words but look beyond them to the hidden person seeking to be (and who is also fearful of) being known. St Sophrony reminds that words are incapable of accurately conveying one’s inner state to another because without a shared common experience, “there cannot be understanding because behind our every word lies our whole being.”⁵ At the same time it is our whole being through which Grace operates beyond our consciousness that brings about healing encounters through our willingness to love our enemies.

The oft-quoted observation of American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, founder of Interpersonal psychotherapy, reminds us how comprehension of differences among us is made

³ Quoted in Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, Vol I (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), 1207.

⁴ Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite*, p 187.

⁵ *St Silouan the Athonite*, 208.

possible because “We are all more simply human than otherwise.”⁶ American psychoanalyst Thomas Malone (1976) considered his most significant discovery in thirty years of psychotherapy practice: “Before you can help anyone be different, you have to accept them as they are...without any insistence that they have to be different for you to love them.”⁷ We may add to this [a variation on] Jesus’ words: “As you have done [or not] unto one another you have done unto Me” (Mt 25:40). This is theological bedrock. Every encounter is a potential encounter with Christ.

Love, Humility, and Prayer

Evagrius Ponticus writes, “The meek [person] does not refrain from love, even if [she] must suffer the worst.”⁸ When the Syro-Phoenician woman was face-to-face with Christ pleading for Him to heal her daughter and He made a racial slur referring to her as a little dog in front of the disciples, questioning why He should help her, she did not immediately cancel Him, indignantly responding to His words as a summary indictment sufficient to cast Him into the category of a prejudicial Neanderthal. Nor did she turn her face away in crippling shame. Instead, St Gregory Palamas notes, she replied with emphatic self-condemnation and humility of repentance, “*Truth, Lord* (Mt. 15:27),”⁹ demonstrating the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in her heart. Meekness, humility, contrition, and love opened her to a healing encounter and made her an example of faith for all Israel.

Elder Haralambos Dionysiatis, a disciple of St Joseph the Hesychast, writes that when the woman

was pleading with Christ over her child, she was saying out loud, “Lord have mercy on me,” but with all her soul. That is prayer of the heart. My child, when the mind is absorbed in God, even if you pray aloud, the prayer is called prayer of the heart. It comes from the depths of the heart. Heart and mind are united with God.¹⁰

In this way, she was tested and revealed by the Lord as one who could not be insulted by words because her vulnerability and motivation were pure and undefiled, enabling her to look beyond them.

Failure to look beyond the surface of words prevents authentic encounter and is ultimately a rejection of Christ. This is the core human suffering, depicted in Genesis as turning the face away and blaming the other, which gives rise to murderous passions, addictions, and

⁶ Harry Stack Sullivan, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*, (Washington, DC: William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, 1947), 7.

⁷ Quoted in Field, N. ‘O tell me the truth about love’. In D. Mann (Ed.), *Erotic transference and countertransference: Clinical practice in psychotherapy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 91–101, 95.

⁸ Evagrius Ponticus, cited in Bunge, Gabriel, *Dragon’s Wine and Angel’s Bread* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 2012), 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁰ Monk Joseph. *Abbot Haralambos Dionysiatis, The Teacher of Noetic Prayer*, Athens, Greece: H. Monastery of Dionysiou, 214.

interminable conflict. Rabbi Martin Buber characterizes the subtlest voice in the Garden as the primordial invitation to monologue:

The mark of contemporary man is that he really does not listen.... I know people who are absorbed in “social activity” and have never spoken from being to being with a fellow human being.... Love without dialogue, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, and accompanying with the other, love remaining with itself—this is called Lucifer.¹¹

The Russian philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, summarizes the results of the damage of monologue in a way that captures the tragedy of the shame-induced aversion of the face from the altar of the heart:

Without faith that we will be understood somehow, sometime, by somebody, we would not speak at all. Or if we did, it would be babble. And babble, as Dostoevsky shows in his short story, “Bobok,” is the language of the dead.¹²

Symptom reduction is possible to some extent with a technical method. This is already happening with various apps and guided therapy treatments you do by yourself. Movies depict people falling in love with Chatbots and robots. But healing encounters are part of a hypostatic, sacred hospitality which is ontological in so far as it is a function of dia-Logos. The person of Christ is the grounds for the possibility of encounters that bring about healing and sanctification. There cannot be such a healing encounter without the possibility of being deeply heard and responding in freedom to a person outside our objectified narcissistic defenses and exile.

Imagine an AI robot designed to do perfect therapy. It says all the right words, follows the empirically verified theories and techniques exactly. Its voice, tone and gestures are accurate and warm, reproducing the most empathic human voice tone and inflections, so that it is empirically undetectable from a living person. Yet you remain forever invisible to it except as an object.

According to Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, the very act of observation impacts what is being observed: at the moment of observation, the speed and position of the electron as a particle is no longer what it actually is in the living process but is an imperfect static representation. The same is true of all images we form of any objectified “self” or “other,” whether by way of diagnosis or judgment or self-identification. They are all *kenodoxia*. The true life of each person is “hid with Christ in God” (Col 3:3), beyond observation. Neither I nor you are fully observable by ourselves or each other as objectifications. We begin to know ourselves through encounters which prove healing and formative, precisely because they privilege the unknowing of love and sustained wonder of communion and the temporary use of words as metaphors like notes of a melody. We experience manifestations of the energy of a person

¹¹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1993), 24.

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), xviii.

existentially, but their essence remains unknowable except for a series of symbolic representations, like footprints left in the sand.

For this reason, healing encounters inevitably involve continual disruption of what we know and who we think we are, the objects of our knowledge, leading to an enlarging of the heart that occurs when encountering Christ anew through each person.

Not a diagnosis

One encounter I will always remember was with a woman who had been sexually abused as a child. I had worked with victims of sexual abuse for eight or ten years at that time in my practice and published an early paper on this in pastoral psychology. In our first meeting I had used the word “textbook case” in regard to the symptoms she was describing to me. She graciously told me at the next session that the most damaging aspect of her wounds was that of not being seen and that she could not work with someone who might do the same thing to her: to treat and diagnose her rather than actually encounter her. She used her voice both to ask for what she needed and to protect herself by making visible my unrecognized potential objectification of her.

Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion wisely recognized, “The psychoanalyst should aim at achieving a state of mind so that at every session he feels he has not seen the patient before. If he feels he has, he is treating the wrong patient.”¹³ Others have observed the same. Martin Buber identifies an even more important dimension: “It is much easier to impose oneself on the patient than it is to use the whole force of one’s soul to leave the patient to himself and not touch him. The real master responds to uniqueness.”¹⁴

To afford such freedom to the other while simultaneously extending an equally sustained loving interest and wonder in another is not humanly possible. Christ alone leaves us this free and loves us completely while not interfering with us. And thankfully Christ is at work invisibly in this way in all encounters, whether we know it or not. In our pride, narcissism, and self-love, we are always interfering in some way. We are in this way both for Christ and against Him depending on many factors at work. In any given moment. Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, elaborating on St Maximos the Confessor’s theological vision, captures the two directions of human freedom that are inherent to Eucharistic reciprocity of our approach to Christ with one another when he suggests,

Eucharistic participation in Christ is the foundation of a freely willed movement towards God, and is the present realization of the personal choice...of that dialogical reciprocity that saves and perfects nature. Its denial is the kindling of a (“contrary to nature”) self-loving necrosis within the abundance of life itself.... We have, then, either freedom as a dialogical love that liberates nature in a eucharistic relationship, or freedom without

¹³ Cited by David Wallin in *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 329.

¹⁴ Cited by Martin Friedman in *Dialogue and the human image* (California: Sage, 1992), 112.

love—or rather, without dialogue—which imprisons nature in a malicious self-will and self-activity.¹⁵

In spite of our affinity for developing theories and attempting to diagnose, predict and control outcomes, 75 years of psychotherapy research confirm that therapeutic change is largely independent of specific procedures and theoretical orientation.¹⁶ The medical model accounts for less than one percent of change. Even in the practice of medicine, compassionate personal relationship has been shown to be as significant a variable in symptom relief as antidepressant medicine.¹⁷

Healing encounters depend more on non-specific common factors such as the person of the therapist and the qualities of the therapeutic alliance, with the exception of one factor. Neurobiological advances and meta-analysis of psychotherapy research reveal a specific process associated with profound change in psychotherapy: “facilitation of an emotional experience that was previously blocked, combined with conscious reflection on the emotional meanings that have emerged.”¹⁸

Fr. Dumitru Staniloae points to the essential component of the healing encounter that goes beyond diagnosis and application of technique according to a theory. “Unless I am loved I am incomprehensible.” The healing journey is about an encounter of love at the altar of the heart. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has identified the approach to this primary yearning. “I can only prove to the Other that he exists...by loving him, a solution introduced by the Christian *kerygma*.”¹⁹

Not a little doll

¹⁵ Nikolaos Loudovikos, “Hell and Heaven, Nature and Person. Christos Yannaras, D. Stăniloae and Maximus the Confessor,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 5:1 (2014), 31.

¹⁶ B.L. Duncan, S.D. Miller, B.E. Wampold & M.A. Hubble (eds), *The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program of the NIMH in 1985 was a large study conducted on antidepressant medication and psychotherapy effectiveness. Twenty years later a cold-case analysis of the data including the variable of the psychiatrists who prescribed the medication showed a significant new finding. The person of the psychiatrist was significant in the effectiveness of the antidepressant. Researchers concluded: “The most effective psychiatrists augment the neurochemical effects of the drug. The person of the psychiatrist makes a difference in the response to antidepressant medications.” Trzeciak, Stephen & Mazzarellis, Anthony, *Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence that Caring Makes a Difference*, (Chicago, IL: Huron Consulting Services, LLC, 2019), 100.

¹⁸ Bruce Ecker, “Nonspecific common factors theory meets memory reconsolidation: A game-changing encounter?,” *The Neuropsychotherapist* 2 (July-Sept 2013), 135; cf. Ecker, Bruce, Ticic, Robin & Hulley, Laurel. *Unlocking the emotional brain: Eliminating symptoms at their roots using memory reconsolidation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹ Cited by Vasileios Thermos in *Thirst For Love and Truth: Encounters of Orthodox Theology and Psychological Science* (Montreal, Canada: Alexander Press, 2010), 51.

A young woman came to see me whose stepfather had begun molesting her when she was ten years old. The first time he violated her was in the swimming pool. She protested that it hurt and he responded, "But it feels good to me." This reveals clearly the evil of narcissistic monologue. The reality of the other's person is eclipsed so she can be used for consumption by the other.

Years of abuse and eclipse of this girl's reality in encounters with her stepfather led to a deep dissociative fragmentation within herself as a survival mechanism. After initial meetings in which she showed no emotion whatsoever and a paucity of speech which elicited many impressions in me, I asked her what kinds of "tests" I needed to pass to earn her trust. She responded immediately by asking, "What is that up there on the corner of your shelf?" I got the faceless wooden doll down and placed it in her hands. "I like these," she said with a slight smile as she moved the arms and legs around in various positions. "You can talk to them and say whatever you want and they don't talk back."

I responded quietly, "Yes, that's true, but that is what happened to you. You were your stepfather's little faceless doll, and he did whatever he wanted to you without acknowledging your voice."

What she said next, and the way she said it, surprised me. With the first expression of emotion I had seen since we began meeting, she said with genuine delight to me, 40 years her senior, "I am so proud of you. You got it!" I was painfully aware that I did not want to recreate this invisibility in the therapy process with her.

I asked, "What else have you noticed? I bet you have observed a lot during the times we have met that you haven't spoken of." She came alive and shared some of her observations. Then pointed to a Russian nesting doll I had on my shelf, decorated with icons of Christ and the Holy Theotokos. "What's that?" she asked. I placed it in her hands and she began taking each of the dolls apart.

"How many are there?"

"Find out," I said. As she took them apart and got down to the smallest figure, which was Christ, I suggested, "Slowly, slowly, layer by layer as you feel safe and are able, tell your truth as you can bear it. At the very bottom of your heartbreak, in the place of your greatest pain and helplessness, you will find Christ making all things new."

This is evident in the sacrament of Confession and in eucharistic Communion. Hope in Christ engendered by the Holy Spirit permits us to speak from the heart in response to the most painful depths of shame and grief hidden from our consciousness.

A nine-hour confession

Some 30 or so years ago I read the account of Alexander Ogorodnikov, who began his life as an atheist and intellectual dissident in Soviet Russia. He was imprisoned and forced to live in excrement piped into his cell from the prison sewage. When he finally was released, he eventually found his way to the Pskov Cave monastery where he described a nine-hour life confession with Fr. John Krestiankin, the abbot of the monastery, a holy elder of some renown.

He said that during the entire nine hours that he poured out his life, the elder wept as he listened. When it was over, Ogorodnikov emerged into the light of day feeling as though he were not walking on the earth and that he wanted to shout to the sky in his liberation. In this way, he said, he found Orthodoxy.

What made this a healing encounter? Dia-Logos. To be listened to deeply from the heart by the elder whose heart had matured in Christ to a place where he could bear witness. This is a very special kind of presence. Psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist suggests that “resting in a state of *not* doing and *not* knowing *permits* us to be agents of revelation.”²⁰ The agent of revelation is Christ, not us, and this is evident in the sacrament of Confession. It is ultimately hope in Christ engendered by the Holy Spirit that permits us to speak from the heart in response to this depth. The psychosomatic unity that occurs in this reciprocity brings the heart to tears and sighs too deep for words because Christ is invisibly active in it touching us so that Spirit and flesh meet.

St Gregory Palamas describes the spiritual mystery of dia-Logos that exists at the altar of the heart in the sacrament of Confession:

If it happens that the priest is more perfect in virtue and sends up more ardent prayers, grace passes through him to the one receiving the sacrament, but if the latter is more worthy and prays with greater zeal, God who wants to have mercy—O how inexpressible is his kindness!—He does not refuse to give grace through him to the person performing the rite; which is obviously what happened in the case of John [the Baptist], as he testified, saying “Of his fullness have we all received” (Jn 1.16).²¹

Psychosomatic unity promotes healing encounters

Healing encounters involve psychosomatic unity, which is characterized by sustained vulnerability and presence—without dissociation from the intensity of affect that is part of the memory and meaning which is conveyed to the body beyond words—when the heart listens and speaks in this way. By comparison, most of the time we are not recollected and fully present. We are spaced-out, dissociated, distracted, “in our heads” or mindlessly reactive, complacently detached from or collapsed into our bodies without awareness. St Theophan the Recluse suggests that in all these ways we are asleep. The *nous* is not actively drawn within the body as the fathers of the Philokalia advise. Rather, we live identified with internal and external objects activating dissociative reactivity and automaticity in a kind of chain of separate islands. Even St Paul laments the fragmentation he has become acutely aware of in himself. “The good that I would do, I do not and the evil I would not do that I keep on doing” (Rom 7:19).

St Mark the Ascetic testifies to the importance of psychosomatic unity as a primary indicator of being. “When our mind and flesh are not in union, our state deteriorates.”²² We

²⁰ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World, Vol I* (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), 766.

²¹ Christopher Veniamin, *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas* (Waverly, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2022), 498.

move too fast and pass along the surface of things. St Makarios of Egypt points to the need for establishing a different rhythm: “Understanding cannot enter you unless you practice stillness.”²² Stillness invites unity and integration that opens to depth. Hesychia and psychosomatic presence from the heart are not techniques to employ but a relationship with Christ to cultivate over a lifetime.

Healing encounters are encounters of continual forgiveness

But of course, love is not so easy. God is love. We are not. Therefore, every encounter with an “other” necessitates an ascetical forbearance, which involves tolerating what is evoked in us by the differences we encounter, along with the threat that the otherness poses for us. We must be willing to notice and endure this evocation as well as look beyond it to the unknown of the other “behind,” as it were, our projections and the feared evocations within us that their presence evokes.

Thomas Ogden offers an astute observation of our avoidance of the surprises authentic encounters will entail for us and our tendency to protect and avoid the dismantling of our emotional comfort zones and our ideological biases when he observes:

To a large extent the danger posed by the first meeting arises from the prospect of a fresh encounter with one's own inner world and the internal world of another person. It is always dangerous business to stir up the depths of the unconscious mind. This anxiety is regularly misrecognized by therapists early in practice. It is treated as if it were a fear that the patient will leave treatment; in fact, the therapist is afraid that the patient will stay.²⁴

If we refuse the other, we are refusing Christ who offers through the other something unique to the world. Ascetical forbearance and continual repentance are needed for healing encounters because each genuine encounter rearranges the content of the heart to include the reality of the other person. This is a life-long struggle and formation that leads to growth and healing of the healer.

Love is creative and always new. It is hypostatic, personal, and always a gift. I often tell my patients, “You pay for my time, but love and care that come from relationship with you are free.” Like Zeno’s paradox, a relationship that never passes beyond quid pro quo utilitarian exchanges and attempts to orchestrate and predict an end result can never arrive at the deeper transformation of authentic encounters. Love does not respond to forced entry of any kind. The greatest example of this is Christ’s total self-offering on the Cross. The humility, love and mercy of God and Christ’s willingness to accept the blame of our projections on to Him of what we

²² Text from G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (trans. and eds.) *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. I (Faber & Faber, London & Boston: 1979), 46. pp. 129.

²³ from “The First Syriac Epistle”, Appendix B, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), 160.

²⁴ Thomas H. Ogden. “Comments on Transference and Countertransference in the Initial Analytic Meeting.” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*. 12 (1992): 224-247.

can't tolerate admitting or seeing in ourselves is what cauterizes the wound. His suffering unto death and prayer to the Father to forgive us, along with the reality of His subsequent resurrection, are what heal and revive us.

Empathy as total apprehension

What Henry David Thoreau advised in order to study nature is congruent with Jesus' invitation to the rich young ruler to do the same with all his riches.

To conceive of [nature] with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange. If you would make acquaintance with ferns you must forget your botany.²⁵

A woman with severe dissociative compartmentalization complained that she might be left frozen and she would collapse in mute silence for a day or more, unable to move off the couch when triggered by things her husband would do or say. Other than these moments that paralyzed her, she seemed perfectly fine—adventurous, daring, personable, and well-liked. The only noticeable symptom in our dialogues in the room was the absence of all strong spontaneous affect. She professed to being completely puzzled by a total incomprehension of “how to feel.”

After some months, at a certain point in a session I shifted how I was listening to her, letting myself be affected by her in totality. Something came to mind gently in the background—an image of one of my own greatest terrors—of being trapped in a pipe upside down 40 feet below the ground, as happened to a little girl (who was eventually rescued) that I had read about in the newspaper many years ago. Whenever I imaginatively put myself in the little girl's situation, at some point I have to stop because anxiety rises so intensely in me from being trapped. I fear I would lose my mind in such a restricted situation, unable to communicate with anyone or move in my body, buried alive in darkness upside down 40 feet below the surface in the pipe, immobile, totally alone, yet still conscious.

I asked her if I was understanding what she was trying to convey to me by disclosing the anxiety I experience when I think of that little girl trapped in that pipe years ago. She gasped, opened the notebook she always brings to therapy, and showed me a picture she had drawn of the girl a few days earlier to illustrate how she feels. She even had clippings of the newspaper account from years earlier and had written all over the drawing in a very detailed way. At the top of the pipe was God saying “It's okay.” Her friends were all around her offering things about her they love and appreciate, but trapped in the pipe and fearing falling into it again made it such that she was unable to hear any of these things. She titled the drawing “The woman at the well” because rationally she knows God is there and hopes in her rescue, but she acknowledged it still doesn't free her from the pipe. I suggested to her that the Cross is the presence of God in humanity's experience of God's absence, that Christ was in the pipe with her at the bottom of the well of the grief, shame and isolation she fears will annihilate her.

²⁵ Henry David Thoreau, cited by Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter of Things*, 1209.

Somehow the connection between us, the girl in the pipe, and the helplessness of Christ on the Cross, opened a small door. She now had a “witness” of her greatest vulnerability and fear. The vulnerability of including anyone in that place of terror and vulnerability, she disclosed, is the greatest risk for her because it is associated with potential rejection leading to total abandonment unto annihilation. After months of not being able to make eye contact—as part of dissociative avoidance of her affect—her feelings began to show up in the room while she actually looked at me when she spoke, which was a major breakthrough.

Face-to-face encounter with presence at the altar of the heart opens the door to unconscious places where all our wounds are: our unconfessed sins, our shame and unworthiness, the memory of our injuries and the fear of the intensity of our unfulfilled longings. That’s where we are wounded and where we wound others. It is also the place where we are forgiven and where we forgive others and are healed.

Practically speaking, as Dr. Candace Pert has suggested on the basis of her research into neuropeptides, the body and its complex network of interactive bioenergetic forms *is* the unconscious.²⁶ Everything that moves the heart is either received or rejected throughout the body. When we begin to listen and speak from the “unfelt known,” as Christopher Bollas calls it, we access the information stored in state-specific form in our neuropeptide systems. The spontaneous arising of affect and its accompanying fears causes anxiety to the conscious island of the objectified self at the same time that part of the soul is crying with relief to finally come out of exile. It is an encounter with the deeply familiar and the unknown at the same time, Jacob at the Jabbok river. We sense a wounding may occur as soon as we are present to one who is present to us in the ways we have described.

The dia-Logos involves God’s activity outside the control of caregiver and patient in hidden ways that surprises both, confirming that every dialogue is a triologue.

In the play space of presence and loving openness to the other as well as attending inwardly, I have noticed that metaphors and pictures arise in response to listening, and sometimes, a still small voice—one that does not insist at all, but offers. It has a slightly different quality than other thoughts.

Once in a dialogue with a patient, this thought was present, and I gave voice to it almost as an afterthought: “And be sure the little caboose hears what I’m saying.” She gasped with surprise and said, “‘Little Caboose’ is the name I was called when I was a little girl.” I have never before or since used that name in that way.

Another time, there was a Special Forces soldier who was part of a supervision group I was conducting. He was a fine man with courage and care for the other soldiers, but he had the most difficult time laying aside the protective armoring he had acquired and allowing himself to be cared for. At the end of our work together we were discussing names, and I suggested that if I

²⁶ Cf. Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotion: The Science behind Mind-Body Medicine* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

were to give him a name, it would be “He who walks alone.” This affected him emotionally, because, he explained, he had grown up on an Indian reservation and this is the name they had given him.

On another occasion, one of my supervisees suddenly did a detour in our discussion, and with no connection whatsoever to our discussion, named a lake in the Midwest that was not apropos to anything. It was an unusual name, and he had no idea that this word would be received by me as a word from God to warn me about a sin that I was wrestling with. I didn’t say anything, but I received it as a kind and gentle word from God to wake me up before I fell into something destructive; it is a reminder that God speaks to us through all sorts of means—if we are paying attention.

A woman was suffering because of her anxiety over touching people, which was interfering with her life and work. At the end of a session after we had worked together for a while and she was relocating to another area, I anointed her hands with oil from the tomb of St John Kronstadt. She wrote to me later, sharing a poem she said had emerged after that event. She had asked herself “Why anoint my hands like that?” She said that her hands had felt like they were on fire, and all the fear she had of touching had vanished. She was deeply grateful.

In my book *Being Bread*, there is a story called “Shark Tooth Grace” about this happening to me on a walk at the beach. I came upon a little boy delightedly calling his daddy to announce he’d found a shark’s tooth. I was joyful for the scene and continued walking, only to discover I had begun to look for shark teeth. As I noticed this, I stopped and asked myself why my joy in that little boy and his father wasn’t enough for me. I let go and walked another 30 minutes, being present to sea and sand and light, and at a point I realized when I was scouring the beach for a shark’s tooth of my own, I had felt the same stress and focus that I been feeling in my work that was tiring me. I had the thought that I needed to return to working in the same carefree and grateful open way as when I was walking the shoreline. At the instant of that thought, a shark tooth virtually leapt into my vision without strain and I laughed gratefully to myself that God was confirming this thought.

One of my clients had informed me that his wife had lost her diamond wedding ring two and a half years earlier. He said he had begun reading *Being Bread* and for some reason had given her the chapter on “Shark Tooth Grace” to read. As it turned out, that very day he was gardening in the flower bed, and there in the dirt where he was digging, the sparkle of her diamond wedding ring was looking up at him. He was amazed, as was I, and both of us wondered at the sweet replication of the story in his life, and then as it were, once more in my own, by way of his gifting me with the telling of his encounter. This proved to be a great blessing and unifier with him and his wife as well as a renewal of faith in God’s presence, which becomes foundational in supporting us in other losses and struggles in our lives.

Longing for Communion

A woman who is extremely accomplished in many areas bears a wound of invisibility from early in her life. She has had many painful betrayals along the way in her attempts to find

healthy relationships that can sustain her longing but remain well-boundaried in the midst of the tumult of her accompanying passions, grief, and wounds. She asks me to pray aloud at the beginning of each session because Christ is genuine and real for her as the primary context for her longed-for encounters and is the primary reference for whatever will occur between us.

One time in a session we entered a sustained silence of presence and palpable stillness together which intensified for fifteen minutes or so without interruption. It turned out to be one of the most meaningful and important encounters, which connected for her what she was reading about in *St Silouan the Athonite*. This gave further hope and invited courage for her to bear without reactivity the hell of the fear, shame, and cynical raging despair that arises in her at times when she is alone and not clothed in the identity forged out of her many accomplishments and adventures. Her exiled pain and unfulfilled longing arising in this dissociated place can result in intense self-directed loathing and the threat of annihilation and suicidal destructive rage.

Some months later at a moment of silence and attention to her, she disclosed with vulnerability and some wonder, that when she is at the threshold of connection that she longs for, she doesn't know what to say or do. There have been occasions when, instead of staying with her in such a moment and helping her wonder and go deeper into what she is encountering, I have instead "waxed eloquent." Although she says she enjoys those moments and acknowledges benefitting from them, after one such session, she later realized she was angry with me that I did not invite her to go deeper into exploring her experience of not knowing how to respond. For her to risk the rejection she feared by exercising her personal agency to ask for what she needs from a trusted, supportive other proved to be valuable—not only for her, but for me, to self-examine my own motivations for speaking. Our discussions arising from our capacity for mismetings have deepened the trust between us and contributed to psychic integration, emotional self-regulation, and a deeper experiential appreciation for the ascetical forbearance and faith that can bear to "Keep your mind in hell and despair not."

Theological postscript

I believe all transformative healing encounters are responses to the One who *is* love and eternally bears witness to this in our lives in ways that are both manifest and hidden. Even though we often fail to love as we are loved, and continue to be divided within ourselves and with each other to our last breath, our hope is that we may again and again in peace, offer ourselves and one another unto Christ our God, the only Lover of Humankind, Physician of our souls and bodies. He cares for us enough to offer His Life for ours, while remaining Himself. He is distributed to all, but never divided; ever eaten yet never consumed, meeting us in the places of shame we most fear, and sanctifying all He touches. Glory to God.