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**A Matter of Life & Death**

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Notes Alison Morgan April 2016

Italics – my notes; normal type - extracts

## 1. Breath of Life

I was returning by train from Oxford to London on a late summer evening. My mind wandered from my paperback to the stubble fields where the stooks of corn cast long blue shadows towards the glowing trees. As so often before, I was moved and held by the beauty of it, and I began to think about what actually happens when a landscape or a great tree or the spectacle of the night sky presents itself and commands attention. That quite ordinary scene beyond the railway track had ceased to be merely an object I was looking at. It had become a subject imbued with a power that was affecting me, saying something to me in the way that music does. Something had generated a current of charged intensity between it and me. If I said that the significance and value that it had taken on was all a projection of my imagination, I knew that that would be understating the truth. In all such experiences a kind of mutual communication or exchange was taking place which did not originate entirely in myself. I was also quite sure that this was a very ordinary, almost universal human experience. I was not an animist, so I did not credit the corn stooks with consciousness. Then what was the source of this current of communication that makes a landscape or a person or an idea act upon me, or upon you, in this way? Who effects the introduction between me and that which is there, turning it into a presence towards which I surrender myself?

As soon as the question took that form the answer fell into place. So this is what is meant by the Holy Spirit! This is the essential nature of his power. This is why he is the universal Spirit of God, leaving no individual and no culture without his witness and challenge. This is how God acts upon human beings, maybe upon all created things, working from within, making them more aware.

I had been given the missing key to what I had been trying to write. New facets of this insight tumbled into my mind, and the last blank pages of my paperback were crammed with scribbled notes by the time I reached Paddington. I remembered not only other occasions when beauty in one form or another had 'spoken' to me, but also a moment during one of those hated maths periods at school when weeks of humiliating blindness and boredom fell away in a flash of comprehension.<sup>3</sup>

That 'I see it now!' is the classical response to the action of the Holy Spirit who is the anonymous opener of our eyes... The Spirit of God is at work to bring us to life, to make us more awake and aware, and so lead us to fresh discovery and a fresh response. He helps us to make the connection by opening the doors of perception, generating a current of communication, opening the eyes. There is nothing in this earth more powerful or more revolutionary than a newly recognized idea, or a situation seen in a new way.

*Martin Buber, I & Thou:*

Or, on the other hand man meets what exists and becomes as what is over against him. . . Between you and it there is a mutual giving: you say Thou to it and give yourself to it, it says Thou to you and gives itself to you. You cannot make yourself understood with others concerning it, you are alone with it... It does not help to sustain in my life, it only helps to glimpse eternity. <sup>9</sup>

*Religious Research Experience Unit in Oxford interviewed a man in his mid-fifties:*

I think perhaps I was six. I was taken to a park in the evening to enjoy a firework display. It was summer. There was a crowd of people by the lake. . . Against the darkening sky, before the fireworks were set alight, I remember seeing these trees, poplar trees they were, three of them. It's very difficult to say exactly what happened because the order of this experience is of its own kind. There was a breeze and the leaves of the poplars vibrated, rustled. I believe I said to myself, 'How beautiful, how wonderful those three trees are.' I think there was awe and wonder, and I remember comparing the luminousness - that's a grown-up word, of course - the marvellous beauty, the haunting oppressive power of those trees with the artificiality of the surroundings, the people, the fireworks and so on. Oddly, I kind of knew that this was something extraordinary at the moment it occurred. It was as simple as that, just seeing these trees, but it was the event of my childhood. . . I knew then it was going to last. And so it has. . . What happened was telling me something. But what was it telling? The fact of divinity, that it was good? - not so much in the moral sense, but that it was beautiful, yes, sacred.<sup>4</sup>

As a woman's letter in the archives of the Religious Experience Research Unit puts it, 'I am convinced that meeting with "God" is not a religious experience but, rather, a real-life experience.' That is profoundly true, and it is bound to be so

because in every 'opening of the eyes', every encounter with the greater reality, God is not to be found in the thing that is seen but in the seeing, for he is the source and giver of that kind of seeing. This, I think, is the significance of the well-known incident in the Old Testament when Moses, the fugitive from the tyrant King of Egypt, herding sheep in the Sinai peninsular, sees a shrub that is on fire yet, strangely, not burnt up. Did it 'strike' him then as an image of his people's long torment in the furnace of Egyptian oppression? At any rate he was overwhelmed by the sense of the presence of God, not so much in the bush as in the seeing. The same is true of the experience of another fugitive, the prophet Elijah. Seeking a fresh confirmation of God's reality, he was given on the bare mountainside a vivid encounter with hurricane, earthquake and fire. Yet it was not in these that he found God but in the communication, the still small voice, that awoke him to the significance of things. This is why it is a complete misunderstanding to dismiss any of the experiences I have recounted as 'nature worship'. Wordsworth was not worshipping nature. The particular object or idea of which we become so intensely aware does not ultimately matter. It may have been a religious picture or a cluster of trees, a philosophical concept or a laboratory specimen. The essential element in all these experiences is the gift of awareness, the 'coming alive'. 9

'The reality of God was encountered, not at the end of a train of thought, but in the opening of a door into a different kind of knowing.' 10

Which is only another way of saying that the Holy Spirit, who is the Creator Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life, has always been quietly, anonymously at work within every human life, within me, within you, drawing your attention to this, to that, opening your eyes, making you aware, awakening all that is truly human in you, all that is most real. 11

## 2. More Dead than Alive

It has long been my conviction that God is not hugely concerned as to whether we are religious or not. What matters to God, and matters supremely, is whether we are alive or not. If your religion brings you more fully to life, God will be in it; but if your religion inhibits your capacity for life or makes you run away from it, you may be sure God is against it, just as Jesus was. 18

The commandment that I lay on you this day is not too difficult for you, it is not too remote. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to fetch it and tell it to us so that we can keep it? Nor is it beyond the sea (some esoteric foreign cult) that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to fetch it and tell it to us so that we can keep it? It is a thing very near to you, upon your lips (something in common parlance) and in your heart (a universal human quest) ready to be kept. Today I offer you the choice of life and death, blessing or curse. Choose life (Deut. 30.11-15, 19, 20).

The issue couldn't be more recognizable or more familiar: Are you alive or dead? Is our community alive or dead? Choose life! ... If choice comes into it, if the quality of our living and the level of our personal awareness is not already written on the cards of our glands or our genes, but lies to some extent in our own hands, then why, in God's name, are so many people only half alive? Why is it such a commonplace that little children are more vividly alive than their parents? 19

*Children are fully aware of everything, stopping to examine every leaf and twig – contrast the frightening amount of deadness around in our Western societies. Our main sin is accidie, sloth, apathy and the Gospel comes to bring the half dead to life. It hurts, of course, because those who respond to the otherness of other people, and take on what Shakespeare calls 'the mystery of things' respond also to the mess and muddle, pain and anger of those others.*

It does involve great pain and takes enormous courage to remain fully exposed and receptive towards the reality of the world around, towards the reality of the human beings we know, towards the reality of our own selves, towards the ultimate reality beyond and within all this... We actually choose to be less alive in order to be less bothered. ... Awareness makes demands, awareness hurts, so we begin to grow a protective shell and become a little blind, a little deaf, a little dead. ... Something is missing, however, and they try in various ways to whip up the lost exhilaration and fend off the encroaching boredom. There are many sorts of experience that momentarily reproduce a sense of vivid life and that dissolving of boundaries by which one becomes part of the unity of things. **Drugs** will do this for you while they last but they let you down into a more horrible lifelessness each time. A **flaming row** can bring one dramatically to life for a while, and so can many other 'performances'; which is what drives the **raconteur** to dominate the dinner table. Yet even while the squabble or the long story is in full spate the speaker's eyes betray the knowledge that in another moment he is going to feel deflated again. Others use **sex** as a way of capturing the sense of aliveness and the disappearance of boundaries, but unless it leads steadily into a fuller commitment, it becomes an increasingly self-absorbed search for an illusory coming to life which cannot add any meaning to the rest of life, as genuine experiences of awareness do. There are other more respectable ways by which those who are partly living simulate an aliveness and a real identity, and

because they are more socially acceptable they are more deceptive and deadly. The oldest delusion of all is that life consists of **achievement**. The consumer society is built upon that lie. When a man or a woman has been badly put down or treated as a nobody the commonest antidote is a spending spree. Like addicts, people crave for more **possessions** or higher attainments or new experiences to offset the emptiness and lack of selfhood. They sacrifice their children to the same craving, projecting upon them the hunger of their **ambitions**. Often they end by losing whatever real self they once had under a pile of achievements or of failures. Jesus Christ asked: 'What will it profit people, what will anyone make on the deal, if they gain the whole world and lose their own selves? What can be given to buy back life, aliveness?' (Mark 8.36, 37).

There is a typically religious version of this delusion of gaining life through achievement, namely, gaining life through **rectitude**. We Christians have talked rather a lot about keeping the rules. We have argued, reasonably enough on the face of it, that because the momentary boost of drugs or sex or violent rage or a new acquisition or a fresh attainment is no substitute for being really alive, then real life is to be gained by refraining from all those things and a lot besides. Of course we also recognized that good behaviour included a great many positive activities and attitudes and that those were even more important. Nevertheless we have tended to identify aliveness with what we call 'living a good life'. But this whole position collapses every time we meet the contrast between the two kinds of family which I drew earlier in this chapter - the well-mannered socially-acceptable family in which one can never quite be oneself and the uncouth, irregular lot who exude warmth and reality. Then it becomes glaringly obvious that keeping the rules cannot be a substitute for that life which the Lord God sets before us and urges us to choose. .. If observance is turned into another form of achievement as a substitute for real aliveness, then it becomes part of the structure of self-delusion and deadness. *Paul argued against law as the right way to become alive.*

Clearly the writers of the New Testament knew about this deadness of spirit that I have been describing. They observed the processes by which it established itself in an individual or a community, very much as we might observe a disease. For example, they noted the interplay between the fear of life and the fear of death. You might have thought that people who have shrunk from the pain and the responsibility of being fully aware and awake, preferring the torpor of the partly living, would be fairly indifferent towards the eventual loss of something they have valued so little. But the opposite is the case. The thought of dying is most horrifying to those who have never fully lived. What makes people struggle so desperately against the certainty of becoming nothing is their failure ever to have been *anything*. That is why the literature of this century of the half-alive is haunted by the dread of not being any more. 'I'm going to die,' cries Pizarro in Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, 'and the thought of that dark has for years rotted everything for me, all simple joy in life.'<sup>4</sup> The significance of that admission lies in the fact that Pizarro, driven by the spectre of his own mortality, had destroyed the civilization of the Incas. Does this throw a new light on the nuclear threat in our own day, I wonder? On the other hand, those who welcome life with all its ambiguity and are kept open to the flow and exchange of that life, seem able to come to terms with their mortality almost as a matter of small account.

28

Sin and death, deadness and sin, are bracketed together all through the Bible, not from the crude idea that our mortality is a punishment for sin, but from a perceptive recognition that these two great negatives interact, each increasing the power of the other. To avoid the pain of true aliveness I settle for 'partly living'. Not having fully lived, I cannot bear the thought of dying and reach for substitutes for aliveness. But they only increase my deadness, making me more unreal and callous, so that I feel not only half-alive but also guilty. I invest more effort in self-justification: I must feel alive while I have time and I must feel I am right, so - more substitutes and more desperation. St Paul calls this vicious circle 'the law, or principle, of sin and death'; it is the way things are, like the law of gravity. In his letter to the Christians at Rome he talks of death 'reigning', and of sin 'reigning' through death's agency (Rom. 8.2; E. 54, 17, 21). 29

### 3. In Him Was Life

*Story of the old people's home visited by a dancer, and how they all started to move and come alive, from The Listener.*

*Jesus's teaching of the crowds in Galilee 'was not just instruction. It was a transmission of life from the fully alive to the half dead. John 6 – to whom shall we go: you have the words of eternal life.*

I believe that this perception of Jesus of Nazareth as a man so intensely alive that others catch life from his touch is the right way to understand those miracles of his. Healing of any kind is nine-tenths self-healing; the power of restoration is built into our very tissues, but so often it is suppressed by a countervailing burden of sheer exhaustion, physical damage or infection, fear, hopelessness or guilt. Someone, be it surgeon or physician, therapist or pastor, has to lift that burden enough to release the springs of health within the body and mind of the sufferer. In doing this it often happens that part of the burden is transferred to the helper. That is the process we see repeated in one story after another in the gospels as the aliveness of Jesus, his awareness and self-identification with others, is brought to bear upon overburdened men, women or children through a word or a touch. And in the exchange he was sometimes drained.

43-44

On the cross the unparalleled aliveness of Jesus Christ went down under the deadness that is our sickness and our sin and was annihilated. Surrendering himself to death he drew it into himself and absorbed it. If you think of our deadness as sin, as we should, then you can see that it was absorbed in Christ's forgiveness; for that is how forgiveness works - it absorbs the wrong by enduring the pain and hostility of it without throwing it back. And if you think of our deadness as a wasting disease you can see that its infection spent itself upon Christ, and was absorbed or, as the New Testament puts it, 'swallowed up'. 47

Lord Jesus Christ,  
alive and at large in the world,  
help me to follow and find you there today,  
in the places where I work,  
meet people,  
spend money,  
and make plans.  
Take me as a disciple of your kingdom,  
to see through your eyes,  
and hear the questions you are asking,  
to welcome all others with your trust and truth,  
and to change the things that contradict God's love,  
by the power of the cross  
and the freedom of your Spirit.  
Amen.

#### 4. Resurrection

The initial impetus of the whole Christian movement and its enduring message for the world is contained in the words: Jesus is alive!

- I believe in the resurrection of Jesus because leaderless and hopeless groups of people do not quite suddenly become irrepressibly confident unless something has happened to cause the change; and that sudden change certainly did take place.
- I believe in the resurrection of Jesus because of the ring of truth that pervades the gospels which include the accounts of it.
- I believe in the resurrection of Jesus because I am one of the millions whose experience of a relationship with God, which is also a relationship with him, compels them to say even today, 'Jesus is alive', meaning by that something much more actual than if I were to say 'Mozart is alive.' 53

*But he's not just someone brought back to life – he belongs more to the invisible world, he is no longer confined to our framework of space and time.*

Now something stranger followed. I quote from Lucas Grollenberg's book, *Jesus*.

'They had become new men with new hopes and new expectations. Moreover what had happened to them seemed to be catching. They felt that they had to pass their experiences on to others, and when those others heard the story, they too were captivated by it. They too found a new way of looking at themselves and the world around, and they too were seized with a new hope. In a word, the story of Jesus, especially of his death and resurrection, told years afterwards to those who never met him, affected them in exactly the same way as the resurrection had affected the broken and hopeless companions of Jesus at the beginning. The resurrection of Jesus was, and is, still going on, both as a personal encounter with Jesus as the Lord, the Living One, and as a coming-to-life on the part of the hearers. The one follows from the other, so that St Paul can speak about people being 'brought to life with Christ, even when we were dead in our sins' and of being 'raised up together with Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2. S5 6).'

57

*What we are brought alive to is not confined to our spirits in isolation, it affects the whole of our lives – sell all you have, unless a grain falls into the ground and dies it will not bear a harvest – life is renewed through the habitual laying down of life. Life comes through death.*

Life through death. It is the pattern of every human birth. To the baby it must certainly feel like dying, and a violent death at that. The only existence it has known, a marvellously secure and balanced form of life, has broken down, and the last moorings with reality are cast off - which is just what happens at the end of our earthly story too. The desperate infant cannot know that an infinitely more free and richer life awaits it when that dying has been done. It has never realized that already, in the old life which it is losing, it has been forming an equipment for the new life beyond - lungs and eyes and voice - which remain dormant and meaningless until that future existence has begun.

If that is the experience of being born, it is equally the experience of being born again - the fullness of life that is the theme of this book. The dying is what the New Testament calls repentance - recognizing the seriousness and the sin of my

own deadness, my refusals of life, my running away from real life. Turning towards Christ, the giver and forgiver. Letting go, and letting God. Then, after that death of repentance, there is the lifting up into a new kind of aliveness and freedom. But it doesn't end there. In any lifetime, Christian or not, there are innumerable little deaths - always painful and frightening (that can't be avoided): the failure of an exam and change of course, perhaps; the break-up of a love affair; the loss of a childish faith; seeing one's child leave home for the first time; moving house; the loss of a job; retirement. Cling to what you have at that moment, and you're lost. Unclench your hands and let it slip away, and you are ready to receive the unimagined new life. If we can learn that habit from all the small occasions for dying which may come to us, then when the last letting-go is called for, it will be familiar and confident. Our formation of that habit will be immeasurably strengthened as we keep our eyes on the truth about God and about life revealed in Jesus, whose attitude was: 'I lay down my life to receive it back again. No one has robbed me of it. I am laying it down of my own free will. I have the inner authority to lay it down and to receive it back again. This charge I received from my Father' (John 10. 17-18). 62-3

So the choice for every human being is between death or death – the death of a letting go that hurts like hell but leads to resurrection, or the death of slow extinction as all the energies are spent on getting and keeping, instead of living and giving. 65

Father,  
if the hour has come  
to make the break,  
help me not to cling,  
even though it feels like death.  
Give me the inward strength  
of my Redeemer, Jesus Christ,  
to lay down this bit of life  
and let it go,  
so that I and others may be free  
to take up whatever new and fuller life  
you have prepared for us,  
now and hereafter.  
Amen.

## The Living God

Life, of which this dynamic, living God is the source, is relationship. The deadness, which is our sin against life, comes from our refusal of exchange, our shutting off of self so as to neither to give nor receive. Being brought to life is the renewal of relationship with this living God and, in him, with all creatures. It follows, then, that the life of the fully alive cannot be sustained in isolation or privacy, but must express itself in community. This does not mean clubs and cliques or general *bonhomie*. It means being open, whenever the opportunity is afforded, for those exchanges whereby the aliveness and freedom of the one flows to the other, or the pain and darkness of the other is shared and taken upon the one. 74

*And yet it doesn't happen.* For most of the time the church, whichever branch you look at, is humiliatingly disappointing and a major obstacle to belief in God. *We do need structures and systems*, but systems, structures and institutions, just like individuals, have to choose between life and earth, over and over again. The church, or any Christian group or society, is prone to grow the hard crust of self-protection, prone to run away from life, prone to find substitutes for being fully alive. *How do we come alive?* Come as a learner; come as a dreamer; come as a pioneer.

- Come as a learner, even if you are one who has heard it all before. With the gift of new awareness you should see old truth in a fresh light and find yourself expressing it in unfamiliar terms..
- Come as a dreamer. In the mutual awareness and exchange of a living fellowship the church should trade its tradition for your dreams.. *Tessimond poem*.
- Come as pioneers. The aliveness of the church, like that of a shrub-rose, is renewed year by year through the vigorous new shoots that spring from near the base of the tree. ... I am not contrasting new members of the church with those who are long established, but new *ways* of Christian discipleship with more traditional forms. *This will mean change* – if in the fellowship of the church the Holy Spirit continues to keep us fully alive and responsive to the pain and need of others, we shall find ourselves in conflict with whatever set-up is causing or perpetuating their plight. *Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven*.