

## THE MYSTERY OF BEING

*Not understanding although they have heard,  
they are like the deaf. The proverb bears  
witness to them: "Present yet absent."*

*Heraclitus*

*Let us then know our limits; we are something,  
but we are not all. What existence we have  
conceals from us the knowledge of first  
principles which spring from the nothing,  
while the pettiness of that existence hides from  
us the sight of the infinite.*

*Blaise Pascal,  
Pensees*

*Every mystery is itself like a river, which flows  
into the Eternal, as into a sea.*

*Gabriel Marcel,  
The Mystery of Being*

*In his final paper, author, psychoanalyst, and existential-humanist  
psychotherapist Rollo May chose to address the loss of wonder in the modern  
world, not least of all in the helping professions. Dr. May was a revered friend  
and mentor of mine, and so I find myself thinking at times about this final  
message of his. If his usual eloquence faltered in his waning years, May's  
depth of vision and feeling did not: he was on cue as always as he pondered  
the increasingly technical and self-concerned nature of psychotherapy as it  
approached simultaneously both the end of the twentieth century and the  
100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (the work which,  
perhaps more than any other, launched the official project of depth  
psychology). Indeed, May remembers Freud in his article—along with Adler,  
Jung, and Rank—admiringly as he laments the vacuity of the unrelenting  
march of supposed progress and opines: *Are we training technicians or  
professionals?**

*It was Rollo May's supreme gift always to yoke the temporal to the  
sublime ("paradox" was the word Rollo chose for this, following after his  
beloved Kierkegaard), and he was true to form right down to the end as he*

*made the leap of faith between the overwhelming onslaught of technical prowess and the loss of wonder which defines our modern experience:*

*The blocking of one's capacity for wonder and the loss of the capacity to appreciate mystery can have serious effects upon our psychological health, not to mention the health of our whole planet.*

*When was the last time you addressed such an item with your local managed care carrier? And when did your professional organization ever seriously consider the loss of wonder and its implications for the health of doctor and patient alike? It has been some time, I imagine, and this is why so many health care providers no less than administrators and clientele are as bored (and dull) as they have now become: "Boredom" states May, "is the loss of the capacity to wonder." Even the degraded language of a system in which words are reduced in meaning to their lowest common denominator is indicted insofar as "the crippling of language" is held responsible, at least in part, for the "lack of wonder" in human experience.*

*This set me to thinking about a series of lectures by Gabriel Marcel—a convert to Roman Catholicism who is nonetheless said to have maintained a fierce independence from the Church's official dogma—given in 1949-50 and entitled, fittingly, *The Mystery of Being*. In this fascinating meditation, Marcel takes up just those themes that occupy May's heart and mind in his last years: the heightened sense of estrangement which results from hypertrophied reliance on empirical/pragmatic approaches to life and the possibility of a reintegration of awe. Marcel describes a world, note Wilde and Kimmel (1962), in which "that which is most uniquely human—the individual's sense of the mystery of [one's] own being and of [one's] encounter with Being—disappears in the unreality of rationalistic concepts, scientific generalizations, statistical averages and norms—in short, in the completely impersonal anonymity of publicly verifiable knowledge." You will recognize the world so depicted: it is our own.*

*Marcel seems almost clairvoyant in his articulation of a world defined by a lack of presence, by “communication without communion: unreal communication.” Like May, Marcel argues for a renewed place for mystery in the modern consciousness. Holding before us the possibility of “ontological mystery,” he suggests that all transmission of objective messages takes place before we have reached the “threshold of being.” We are no doubt considering here matters of the finest subtlety, themes with which we feel either an immediate sympathy or perhaps nothing at all in accordance with our natures, according, that is, to “two notions of gathering to oneself, of welcoming and seizing . . . a difference of attitude.” Indeed, we find ourselves at the very heart of the modern dilemma. Again like May, Marcel traces the thread between what has today become the debased language of speed, technology, and sound bites and the loss of the capacity for wonder:*

*Words perhaps are essentially magical; it is in the nature of the word as such, to evoke a presence. But we have to use words for practical purposes; so little by little this magical evocative power of words tends to disappear. The function of poetry is that of restoring this very power to language, but the conditions in which it can be restored, today, tend to become more and more hermetic.*

*This is a keen observation, one that ties in at once with our thoughts about dullness. (“Language,” Emerson had written, “is fossil poetry.”) The poetic, issuing as it does from reflection in solitude, as opposed to the objectified thus becomes the means of “transcending the plane of causality.”*

*Even more striking is Marcel’s skepticism about the very language of illness:*

*[How suspicious we ought to be of those lectures on illness which people seem so specially apt to deliver if they have never been seriously ill themselves: what rude health they always seem to enjoy, those bluff haranguers of the sick! Quite literally they do not know what they are talking about, and their smug loquacity has something very insolent about it*

*when we consider the terrible reality they are faced with, a reality which they ought at least to respect.*

*It is doubtful, of course, that Marcel ever imagined the rapidity of descent into a linguistics of behavioral/technical totalitarianism in which the human being all but disappears from view--the corporate language of health care with which we must now contend--even in his worst postmodern nightmares. He does not despair, however, but rather points the way toward "a co-articulation of the spiritual and the vital" in which humankind's religious impulse commingles in inexorable tension with the body. With such a perspective, even death becomes "mystery" and not merely "objective event." Marcel points here toward the embrace of the paradox of existence (the embrace of *soma* and *psyche*) rather than one-sided retreat into either empiricist absolutism or New Age fancy. He argues for awareness both delicate and difficult while holding as ideal the ineradicable bond "between the precarious and the precious."*

*Both May and Marcel are speaking to a mode of experience that transcends the concretely rational while recognizing its inherently human limitations. Such experience cannot be grasped by the logical mind alone, indeed cannot be "grasped" at all, really, but is rather offered, states Marcel, as a "kind of appeal to the listener or reader . . . a call upon [one's] inner resources." When we enter "the inner courts of philosophy" and concern ourselves "with the highest matters, with, if you like, presences, we cannot hope to come across anything at all comparable to the permanent acquisitions of the elementary sciences." But the discussion is urgent and hence taken up by these two great men at critical moments in their lives. Wonder gently, almost imperceptibly, inclines us away from the egocentric preoccupations of the mundane world, from narrow self- and clan-interest, and--through contemplation of the eternal and life's unmanliness--thus returned to the realm of interconnectedness and the prospects for human decency. Marcel's eloquence even here does not falter as he suggests "a metaphysics of hospitality," the "sacredness of the unprotected" that arises as*

a matter of course out of (the non-act of) contemplation. Rollo May's words would have been equally apt: compassion and care.

Mystery urges wisdom as we become aware that our best laid plans and strivings are such stuff as dreams are made on, "always liable to collapse like houses of cards under our very eyes, leaving something else in their place, something which the original structures . . . had merely masked from us." "This something else," says Marcel, "is not *the important*, but *the essential*, the 'one thing needful.'" He refers of course to that awareness that accompanies the experience of wonder at Infinity. And with this we have come full circle and back to Pascal.

References:

Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*. In *The Search for Being*, edited by Jean T. Wilde & Mark Kimmel. New York: Noonday, 1962.

Rollo May, *The Loss of Wonder*. In *Dialogues: Therapeutic Applications of Existential Philosophy*, 1(1), 1992. (Publication of students of the California School of Professional Psychology, Berkeley/Alameda campus)

Author's note:

These thoughts are offered, as Rollo May himself wrote at the end, "with the hope of restoring, so far as we can, the richness, the mystery, the fascination" of our work and lives.