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How I Came to Appreciate Simone Weil

Listening to “Enlightened By Love, The Life and Thought of Simone Weil” on CBC, I found myself captivated by the five hour presentation by David Cayley (with his daughter Kate reading the words of Weil) on their Ideas programme. That was in 2002. A 2014 post by Cayley says the show was inspired by the admiration felt by Canadian philosopher George Grant, for Weil. Cayley’s main point was that Weil showed that Jesus was about love, and is a path to enlightenment through love. An audio cassette set of Enlightened by Love is available online at <http://www.davidcayley.com/>. I find ideas relevant to today’s world every time I look at anything by or about Simone Weil. She may be a living saint, for her influence grows year by year. Perhaps I should make a litany on her, and hopefully, some bishop will declare her a Servant of God, so that we may eventually have Sainte Simone Weil, inspirer of skeptics, or perhaps Sainte Simone of John of the Cross, a patroness of mystics.

In 2002, influenced by Thomas Merton’s Seven Storey Mountain, I had recently undergone the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) but I had not fully merged my Yoga philosophy with being newly catholic. My guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, in The Autobiography of a Yogi, showed his admiration for the Carmelite saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. It just hadn’t yet occurred to me to define myself as a Carmelite Yogi. Simone Weil pointed me that way. She seems to see the great value of the church to lie in the mysticism of those Carmelite saints. John’s Dark Night of the Soul is the classic inspiration of her version of Christian mysticism.

Mysticism as My Motivation for Studying Simone Weil

I had heard of Weil long before 2002 and understood that her Letter to a Priest asked difficult questions of the church. I had been led to believe she had said she might accept baptism if good answers came back. But I didn’t actually see that book until I read it in French in 2013. Far from looking to be baptized, Weil felt that she was a servant of God by commenting from outside the fold, however much she may have felt part of the flock. Being in a flock for her, might include obedience, but the kind of certainty she would need to be sure of who was giving the directions, left her entirely free in her thinking. For her, God is the ultimate good, combining love and truth. She could appreciate him fully as an impersonal being. When she was blessed by having a personal encounter with Jesus, she gained confidence that she was on the right path for her. Her relationship with God and Jesus required no intermediary. She sought clarification in the writings of mankind but had no need for it. Here is part of how she was serving God: searching for ways to provide clarity for people who approached spirituality as skeptics, helping them search, and providing

encouragement for everyone to aspire to the Good. In the process, if she shook anyone's faith, she would expect them to regain it through inquiry and contemplation. (Would not the value of a "shake"able faith be found when it is shaken? If it could or should have been shaken, was it worth more than illusion?) When read by non-skeptics, Weil shows them the greater depth that is available to be contemplated. In the case of readers who are comfortable in their pews in mystically inclined groups and churches, including New Thought and the Carmelites, her work provides much fallow ground for advancing their knowledge and awareness, adding insight into mysticism, thus improving their spiritual tools. While Simone Weil is considered by some to have been against the church, she was not. There are, however, anti-church people who try to use her work against the church. She was not only a servant of God, but also a servant of the church. She admired, even loved, The Church of Christ (that church of which the Pope is the head, and which includes the Roman Catholic Church). Part of her serving the church was researching and reporting on many anomalies, only some of which were caused by translation and editing. Her attack on the misuse of the concept of anathema is ammunition for believers and non-believers both, to hold leaders' feet to the fire and prevent recurrence of inhumanity by churches and collectivities of all kinds. She saw the church as being fully capable of improvement and would not have blamed it for past errors, if corrected. The idea of the church organization, with its myriad of functions and departments, appealed to her, and the breakaway churches, especially those with narrow focus, did not. She would probably have liked to see some sainthoods revoked if that were possible, (especially Louis IX for genocide). She loved the idea, at least, of the sacraments, even if she starved herself of them.

Reading Weil prompted me to produce a Meeting of Minds show at the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara in St Catharines, Ontario. I played host Steve Allen and a priest played Jacques Derrida. Together, we grilled Weil about her experience with George Herbert's 1633 poem, Love III, and her mystical encounters with Jesus. Personally, as a yoga disciple, inspired by my guru's paramguru, Lahiri Mahasaya, I developed the idea that her death was a mystic exit, like Lahiri's as described in Yogananda's Autobiography of a Yogi. In the play, on August 24, 1943 Simone went away with Jesus permanently when, as many times before, he came to her.

Mentorship

Simone Weil's mentor was Alain, the guru of education in his time. I don't believe she had a spiritual guru except, in due course, Jesus. Weil has become a mentor for me. In thinking, choosing, and in writing, I have long felt guided by some guardian angel and by my spiritual guides. These are my guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, his protégé Roy Eugene Davis, and Swami Vivekananda. In 1969, I read the swami's 1893 address to the Chicago World's Fair "congress of religions", converting me from agnosticism to Yoga. My other main influencers in spiritual matters are Emerson (inspirer of the Unitarians and Unity Church), Krishna, Jesus, Shankara, James, Bucke (Cosmic Consciousness), Venkatesa, and Simone Weil. All these have come to form some part of my conscience or consciousness.

Weil speaks against pragmatism, but I don't think its founder, William James, would have had any trouble getting along with her. I see her as a pragmatic person. In his Varieties of Religious Experience, James has a chapter on

saintliness. He deplores the very unpragmatic trance state of Saint Margaret Mary, and extols the practical effectiveness of Saint Ignatius Loyola. I think he would put Weil in the same camp as Loyola, someone who worked very hard and accomplished a great deal. She had to seek out opportunities to do whatever she thought was her share of suffering, for reasons which she does try to explain, while Loyola had to deal with challenges that he did not choose for himself. Other than that, they could have written for each other.

We Like People Who Prompt Us to Say “That’s What I Have Always Said”

I hope it is also true that I have learned to be aware of what “I have always said”. I believe that I have actually learned much from Simone Weil. She certainly has crystallized my thinking on several issues. Many of us when learning something that fits in immediately with our pre-dispositions, had not actually known what was just learned in a way that we could put into words. But the new explanation simplifies points for us, and it becomes what we think is what we have always said. Occasionally some part of the new realization actually was familiar to us, and we may have been able to speak vaguely about it. The thoroughness of Weil’s explanations is such that we can let ourselves be fully convinced, actually make it part of our vocabulary, and not even have to memorize the extensive proof she made. To a mystic, that is what faith might mean...not having to memorize the proof. Of course, non-mystics say that they can accept things “on faith”, without the philosophical exercises that Weil would put us through. When I was told to “just believe, and faith will grow”, as though I could believe something I did not believe, by my Anglican catechist-priest at age 17, I deemed it ridiculous and became an agnostic.

“Kenotic Thought and Sainteté Nouvelle as explained by Simone Weil”, was a presentation by J. Edgar Bauer at a conference in 2002 on Minority Religions, Freedom of Conscience, and Social Change. It seems to me that Sainteté Nouvelle is effectively the same thing as New Thought, as understood by the International New Thought Alliance. (Annex A illustrates the idea of Kenotic Thought in which, it seems to me, kenotic and kenosis come from the same root as “ken”, as in the expression “beyond my ken”. That root is the proto-Indo-European “gno”. Know, gnosis, agnostic, ignorance and cunning all arise from that root. Presently, the English dictionary defines kenosis based only on one use of it. That is from the Greek, kenoo apparently meaning an emptying of divinity by Jesus described in Phil 2, 6-7 by Saint Paul). In the French dictionary, we have “keno” directing us to “see cenno” and there the definitions include “a coming together”. That seems to be what J. Edgar Bauer is getting at in Annex A.

The New Thought Movement in North America goes back to Phineas Quimby in the 1850s, and has been part of my life as a member of the Unity Church and Centre for Spiritual Awareness, since 1967. Ralph Waldo Emerson does a good job of explaining the God of his perception, a very impersonalist God. I find Venkatesa’s description more uplifting. Thus, I say Weil has given me a fresh look and (indirectly) a new word for “what I have always thought”, at least as far back as 1967. The new word is Kenosis.

I Feel Justified by her Points of View

When asked in the past how I can call myself a Carmelite Yogi, “How can a Christian, catholic, carmelite also be a Yogi?”, I am now able to

answer, "Read Simone Weil". I think she could have called herself a Carmelite Yogi. She helps me feel that my path is valid, because she gives logical dismissal to most of the alternatives, at the same time building up the path for mysticism, of following John of the Cross, and following Yoga. Annex B is a story I wrote for a writing class; the italicized words are directly quoted from Gravity and Grace by Simone Weil. I hope this fictional story shows how deeply Simone Weil affects me. I can relax now, with the idea that one can love God so much that it doesn't matter if he exists. "Who?" is really a separate, but related, question," is this God that may or may not exist?" An impersonalist God, of the kind described by Emerson and many mystics, may not be a God worth calling a God, to someone who lives in another world than that of the mystics. But to a mystic, such a God can be all-the-more worthy of love. Certainly such a God cannot be faulted for letting bad things happen, which is the reason many people give for dropping out of religions. At least, that is my point of view from my limited understanding today. Weil almost certainly understood something much deeper. Believing that, I am challenged, inspired and motivated to learn more about what she understood. Thus, again, I appreciate Simone Weil.

History

Being a lover of history, I appreciate how Weil provides so much historical background to her conclusions, often with innovative ideas. L'Enracinement, (The Need for Roots) teaches about French history, filling in a major gap in my education, and also doing so from a surprising point of view. As an engineer, I knew little French history beyond the impact on Canada of the French state in the time of Le Roi Soleil, Richelieu, and Canada's founder, Samuel de Champlain.

I like to be able to disagree with Weil, and, even more, I like to find so much that I can easily see as valid. She certainly does what T.S. Eliot's preface to The Need for Roots asserts...carry points to extremes. But, she leaves you space to find how far you can go in accepting her ideas on some sort of continuum, a graduated rejectivity. It is not an all-or-nothing presentation that she makes. I would prefer not to go as far as she does in deploring the Romans, but I can accept all she says about them as true, without necessarily painting them all with the same brush. The extreme idea that only one Roman was good, in her austere definition of goodness, and he was not named, nicely illustrates her essay on how historians can become assassins. But we know that there must have been many good people who were Roman. Part of Weil's method of teaching us,

is to give an exception...so she does say, when negatively comparing the Romans with the Greeks in their artistic contribution to the world, that there was one good Roman arts inspirer, her exception, Ovid. The unnamed good Roman in her essay on history was “assassinated”, literally and figuratively, by being a target of power. Therefore, following her assertion that historical documents are written by the conquerors and oppressors, his name is unimportant to them and he is assassinated from life and from history. She does this to show why it is necessary to read between the lines when reading history. I appreciate Simone Weil for teaching me this.

Politics

Weil shows the extreme of her points, as warned by Eliot, in building up Adolf Hitler on the basis of his honesty and his courage, in particular on his lionizing of the Romans, saying he did a great job of emulating Sulla, as he said he would. This “good” Hitler is just a straw man for her devastation of him elsewhere. Similarly, it is said that she spoke against Joan of Arc, yet Weil calls her France’s only true hero, when she is developing a theory related to heroism. In The Need for Roots, she shows us the proper place for loyalty, and what kind of collectivities it is incumbent on us to make worthy of loyalty.

The Need for Roots should be considered essential reading for anyone who wants to know statecraft. With John Stuart Mill’s On Democracy, and The Prince, we have a trilogy. Aspiring writers of constitutional reform and writers of party platforms, as well as party leaders themselves, should read these books. All citizens, in all countries, need to read the first two of these books, to be able to evaluate and encourage improvement in their societies, and to rid themselves of the idea that “majority rules” trumps all, in democracies. Weil shows us how rights must follow from obligations. The Needs of the Soul (the roots themselves) are worthily explained and the conversation is extraordinary. A society based on the planting and nurturing of these roots as Weil describes them, would be utopian, but I believe, for the most part, achievably so. Therefore I can appreciate Simone Weil for giving me fresh optimism on the subject of political improvement and social change.

The Spirituality of Work

In The Need for Roots, Weil sets out to teach us a spirituality of work. How much, if any, of this she got from her studies of Yoga and Hinduism, where Karma-Yoga is a spirituality of work, is not mentioned. She does elevate work and action to the point of being

subsumed in Truth and the Good, similar to what Karma-Yogis believe is a full and valid approach to mystical Self -(God)-realization.

Conclusion

Simone Weil teaches us the perfectible harmony of Goodness and Truth. She shows that Love and Beauty attune to the same harmony, and hints that there we can find God. We can learn that this harmony, offered to God, however perceived, and however offered, can bring us to what is called in Annex A, "Kenosis" a universal reconciliation between humanity and the divine. That harmony can be for each individual with the divine, and it can be for each spiritual or religious path, with the divine. I find Weil inspires me toward both. Her drastic methods, however, do not strike me as necessary.

I have shown how I came to appreciate Simone Weil from hearing about her Letter to a Priest and listening to CBC's Enlightened by Love program. I have also shown how Simone Weil deserves my appreciation, in underpinning my concept of mysticism, in being a mentor for me, in reminding me of "what I have always said", in justifying my spirituality as a Carmelite Yogi, in opening my eyes to fresh views of history, and in inspiring me toward socio-political progress and involvement, which includes encouraging everyone to study The Need for Roots. Importantly, she motivates me to learn more about her mystical view of God. She is a model of incisive thought, saintly, and relevant. She is an inspiration.

Annexes

1. **Kenosis and Universalism**, Note Aurobindo's paragraph on Spirituality as an all-embracing "Kenosis", and the presentation entitled "Simone Weil, Kenotic Thought and the Sainteté Nouvelle". When googling the actual paper, on www.cesnur.org, items come up where Weil's work is said to contain "the very heart of prophetic monotheism".

2. **A Dialogue to Show Weil's idea on loving God so much that it doesn't matter if He Exists**. This is a fictional story arising from a writing class assignment. It justifies a point from John of the Cross, appearing in Weil's Gravity and Grace. It follows from her recounting of the story of the Miser and the Zen Master.

Annex B DOES IT MATTER IF HE EXISTS

The writing class assignment was to write fiction for non-fiction, or vice versa. I have taken the real Simone Weil, connected her to Marcel Proust's mother, Jeanne Weil (also of the influential Parisian-Alsatian Jewish intelligentsia), and involved Simone's brother André, who was to win the Kyoto Prize for Mathematics in 1994, as well as two actual relatives of Marcel Proust. The story supports Simone's actual conclusion on Detachment and the value of allowing for God not to exist, from her book Gravity and Grace.

Text

Adrienne Proust approached her cousin Simone Weil at a family funeral in Paris in 1938. Simone asked "How is Tante Adele?" "She is doing a little better this week, but won't be able to make it here today", replied Adrienne.

Adrienne Proust, like Marcel, had been brought up Catholic, even though they were all part of the Jewish gentry of Paris. In fact, Adrienne was teaching at the Ecole Carmelite, named for the Carmelite nuns martyred in France in Compiègne during the Reign of Terror on 17 July, 1794.

Adrienne was married with a child. Regardless, she was treated as a nun and was in a Third Order Community of the Discalced Carmelites, the community that operates the Paris Ecole Carmelite. Her cousin, Simone's brother André, came over as Adrienne was thanking Simone.

"Thanks for your letter about Herbert's Poem, Love III. How did you come across something so obscure? I read it, and took it into my heart and my prayers. I can well imagine what effect it must have had on a non-believer like you."

The ever-precise Simone responded "Do you mean you were impressed by what Herbert wrote in 1633, or what I wrote last month?"

André, ever critical of his young sister, interjected "How could she mean what you wrote? She spoke very specifically of the poem."

"André," responded Simone, "Obviously, we are talking about the effect either the poem, or my letter about it, had on being taken into Adrienne's heart and prayers. She could mean that when she read the poem, which I wrote out in my letter, or my description of how it transported me mystically, she had a similar experience.

Either she or I or both of us, would be shocked that I could experience Jesus as Love sitting down beside me, and carrying me away. I was certainly shocked to have any religious experience, and it has transformed my life. But I imagine such experiences would be old hat to Adrienne, who is a mystic saint herself."

"Hah", said Adrienne. "A saint now, am I? Well, my cousins, I meant both. I was impressed by both, but I think Simone is closer to mysticism than I am, even though I read Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross almost every day, and I think I even have an understanding of his Dark Night of the Soul. Writing her letter to me, could have made Simone's understanding deepen. Having had such an experience with Love III, she may well be on the path, even near the end of the path, of mysticism."

André: "Really? After all that time she spent with me and the yogis in India, mastering Sanskrit and the Vedas, she finds her mystic transport in the 300 year old words of an Englishman?"

Simone: "You know very well that I did, André, and you said you could see it in my eyes when I told you. But Herbert was Welsh, from the Pays de Galles and therefore, being Gallic, close to us culturally. His stepfather was John Donne and he was the inspiration of Henry Vaughan, major contemplative poets all. His brother was called by Doctor Samuel Johnson, "the father of British deism". I learned of him in Emerson's essay "English Traits". Emerson puts him among the British literary heroes so, Adrienne, is he really obscure? You know that all my writings up till experiencing Love III were about politics, nations, social justice, education, labour, and ethics. However much I appreciate what the Yogis, and the Buddhists, and the Daoists taught me, I am now devoting myself to studying Jesus and his mythology."

Adrienne: "You say you were visited by him, that you believe in him, and yet you think it is a mythology?"

Simone: "Yes, I believe in him. But for all I **know**, he is a man who **believed** that prophecy foretold him, and I am trying to find out what the Romans and others added to his story, to make him what the Christians say he is. He was not a Christian. He was a Jew, like what we really are, culturally at least. The Romans made him out to be an incarnation of Apollo. I don't think Jesus would have believed that, although he might have, as it would fit in with monotheism and would mean that he considers Apollo one of the names of the One God. You may know that the Hindus say that God welcomes being called by any of his many names. But I am finding what is now called Christianity throughout the ancient Greeks' writings. That is my main study these days."

Adrienne: "To what end? Why?"

Simone: "Good question, because it really doesn't much matter, unless perhaps I find something inspiring to either the church or the skeptics. But if he did achieve mastery on his own, even to the point of resurrecting himself, which I really think might have taken place, if he did this simply by believing what he did believe, and if he was thereby able to bear the intense suffering of which we think we know, he could be a great model for us all. Of course, he is that. But if he did it as a man, with the same powers as we all have, rather than as a godly being...just think of what that can mean for us."

Adrienne: "Then what about God. Where does he fit in here?"

Simone: "Detachment is the key. When God has become as full of significance as the treasure is for the miser, we have to tell ourselves insistently, that He does not exist. We have to experience love for Him even if He does not exist. It is He who, through the operation of The Dark Night, withdraws Himself in order **not** to be loved the way the treasure is by the miser."

André: "Are you saying it is possible that God doesn't want us to love him how and where we may be, rather like Jesus telling his followers that even a tax collector is kind to his family and friends, as though anything short of The Dark Night experience, is somehow inadequate?"

Simone: "For me, at least, that is the case. But I do think that all of us could benefit from taking that step, even if some suffering results. It takes you up past where everything is just tit for tat. It takes you where you not only love God, but he finds you worthy of his love. Sure, he may love you in any case, but does he respect you as well as love you?"

Adrienne: "Doesn't this approach diminish or destroy faith?"

Simone: "No, strong faith requires critical inquiry; Jesus said so himself. As John Yepes, your great Carmelite Saint, John of the Cross, demonstrated in his own Dark Night, it does not diminish faith, it fulfills faith, it fulfills love, it fulfills life".

Adrienne: "When I read John of the Cross tonight, I'll keep your words in my heart, Simone".

Footnote

The italicized words are from Gustave Thibon's preface to Weil's Gravity and Grace, published in English in 1953. They follow from her recounting a story about a miser and a zen master.

Before she died 24 August, 1943, her spiritual writings, even the famous "Letter to a Priest", had not been published.

From the time of Weil's experience with Love III in 1938, she had found a spiritual focus for everything, including the political work she was doing toward a new constitution for post-war France.

On what she was doing for the Free French, her conclusions are to be found in The Need for Roots, subtitled "Prelude Towards a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind". That title was also published from her papers chez Gustave Thibon.

Weil had lived at his home near Marseilles, and at a nearby farm, during the Vichy regime.