



Love
in the
Void

*Where God
Finds Us*

— c/o —
**SIMONE
WEIL**

Edited by Laurie Gagne



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Where God Finds Us

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P L O U G H P U B L I S H I N G H O U S E

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Introduction

THE WRITINGS of philosopher and mystic Simone Weil first appeared in the late 1940s and early 1950s – the period after World War II characterized by a widespread desire to return to normalcy in Western societies. Having defeated the “great beast” of totalitarianism, the liberal democracies concentrated on creating the good life at home. In America, especially, it was the golden age of the middle class: a comfortable, even affluent lifestyle seemed within the reach of everyone. Given this context, it is not surprising that Weil, who had died in 1943, quickly achieved legendary status among a whole generation of countercultural intellectuals and spiritual seekers. Her writings are radically, vehemently anti-bourgeois, as was her short, intense life. Christians and atheists alike seemed to find in Weil a corrective to the burgeoning consumer culture that threatened to stifle the life of the mind and

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the soul. The French philosopher Albert Camus, for example, known for his depiction of a moral landscape without God, praised this lover of God extravagantly, calling her “the only great spirit of our time.”¹ The equally atheistic literary critic Susan Sontag, writing in the *New York Review of Books* in 1963, allowed that Weil was fanatically ascetical and given to “noble and ridiculous political gestures” but confessed that she was “moved” and “nourished” by Weil’s “seriousness.” “In the respect we pay to such lives,” Sontag wrote, “we acknowledge the presence of mystery in the world. . . .”²

In our time, too, when religion – really, fundamentalist religion – has once again emerged as a force in world events, Simone Weil’s writings have again been invoked, this time to distinguish between true religion and false religion or idolatry. In *Gravity and Grace*, Weil uses the language of idolatry to describe the way that religion can become destructive. There, we read that “idolatry comes from the fact that, while thirsting for absolute good, we do not possess the power of supernatural attention, and we have not the patience to allow it to develop.”³ So convinced was Weil of human beings’ susceptibility to idolatry that she came to emphasize the necessity of non-action, or waiting

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for grace, as the starting point for responsible action in the world.⁴ Rowan Williams, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, writing in the aftermath of 9/11, noted the importance of Weil's concept of "the void," calling it a "breathing space," a moment, created by catastrophe, when we are open to God and others.⁵ Like Weil, Williams believes that all too often we waste these moments by filling them up with our attempts to make God fit our agendas, in religious language that is "formal or self-serving."⁶

Never dreaming that she would be the subject of all this attention so many decades later, Simone Weil died in 1943 at the age of thirty-four, the time of life when most young people are hitting their stride in work and relationships. Commitments have been made, sometimes vows have been taken, and there's often a mortgage to cement the young person's ties to a particular place and way of being for the next fifty years. Even today, when people travel the globe and change jobs frequently, maturity still means some measure of "settling down." In the brief time that she had on this earth, Simone Weil constructed a life that was anti-thetical to time-honored standards of worldly success.

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She sought to uproot herself from everything – her parents’ solicitousness, the comfortable surroundings of her childhood, and even the normal benchmarks of academic achievement – to which she might form an attachment. Her goal was an untrammelled heart – the necessary condition, she believed, for knowing the truth. We can chart her life according to the turning points in this passionate quest. The body of work she left us – virtually all of it published posthumously – is the fruit of an anguished, but ultimately luminous spiritual journey.

Born in 1909 to a Jewish family in Paris, Simone Weil had a privileged, extremely intellectual childhood. She and her older brother, André, who was widely regarded as a prodigy (he became an internationally recognized mathematician) would memorize long passages from the classics of French drama and play complicated math games; this before she even went to school. At the Lycée Henri IV, under the tutelage of the well-respected but non-conformist philosopher Émile-Auguste Chartier, her intellectual vocation seemed confirmed. He judged her short essays outstanding and predicted a brilliant career for the high-minded young woman. However, at the age of

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fourteen, she went through a deep depression during which she even thought of dying, convinced, as she writes in her spiritual autobiography, of “the mediocrity of her natural faculties.” The comparison with her brother, she says, had brought her “own inferiority home” to her. It wasn’t the lack of outward success that she lamented, but rather the thought of being excluded “from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides.” She suffered this way for months, until the conviction suddenly came to her that anyone can enter “the kingdom of truth reserved for genius,” if only “he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention on its attainment.”⁷

This insight, that truth (which included, for her, “beauty, virtue, and every kind of goodness”⁸) is accessible through the heart’s longing, opened up a spiritual as opposed to a purely intellectual path for Weil. She was, at this point, agnostic. She had never read the Gospels, but her discovery, she says, amounted to the realization that “when one hungers for bread, one does not receive stones.”⁹ Confirmed in her quest, Weil made other choices during her teen years that seem to have set her on the solitary course from which she

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never diverged. She embraced the spirit of poverty and “always believed and hoped that one day Fate would force upon [her] the condition of a vagabond and a beggar.”¹⁰ Her classmates called her “the Red Virgin” in jest, but her commitment to chastity and decision not to marry were adopted deliberately. “The idea of purity,” she explains, “with all that this word can imply for a Christian, took possession of me at the age of sixteen . . . when I was contemplating a mountain landscape.”¹¹ She never wavered in this commitment. The unconventional turns her path took are in part explained by the understanding of vocation at which she arrived during this time: “I saw that the carrying out of a vocation differed from the actions dictated by reason or inclination in that it was due to an impulse of an essentially and manifestly different order; and not to follow such an impulse when it made itself felt, even if it demanded impossibilities, seemed to me the greatest of all ills.”¹²

Impulses such as she was describing are not a matter of following the ego’s desires, however insistent. Instead, they spring from the point of transcendence in us – the soul – which tends unerringly toward eternal truth. Trusting this tendency, instead of more rational

considerations, resulted in a decidedly unspectacular teaching career for Weil. After graduating highest in her class from the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, she taught at girls' schools in the French countryside from 1931 to 1938. A lightning rod for controversy because of her extreme opinions, she became embroiled in conflicts with school boards, who strongly objected to the social activism she could not resist undertaking.

Ever since the age of five, when she had refused to eat sugar, having heard that it was denied the soldiers at the front, Weil had exhibited a desire to identify with those who suffer. (Simone de Beauvoir, a classmate of Weil's at university, says that when she heard that Weil had burst into tears on hearing about a famine in China, she envied her for having "a heart that could beat right across the world."¹³) In Le Puy and Auxerre, Weil's first two teaching assignments, she took up the cause of the workers, writing articles for leftist journals, marching and picketing, donating most of her salary to the purchase of books to be used in workers' study circles, and providing free lessons to all comers. Reportedly, her students at both schools loved her, but in each place, Weil was dismissed after only

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one year.

A break from teaching gave Simone Weil the opportunity to be one with the workers quite literally. She obtained employment at a succession of factories in Paris, including the Renault automobile plant. Proposing to study the conditions of industrial work, she immersed herself thoroughly in the factory environment; the experience was transformative. Physically, it undermined her health. Weil had always been delicate and subject to migraines, but her headaches increased during her year in the factory. Mentally, it was excruciating. She could not endure the pressure of assembly line work, nor its indifference to the individual. Her vision of life as oriented toward the ideal was replaced with a permanent awareness of the void, of death. “As I worked in the factory,” she writes in her spiritual autobiography, “indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue.”¹⁴ Up against death we are powerless. Weil

says that in the factory, she “received forever the mark of a slave” and “since then, I have always regarded myself as a slave.”¹⁵

Paradoxically, Weil derived tremendous spiritual benefit from her time in the factory. Her new consciousness, she says, turned her in the direction of Christianity. Prior to her factory experience, Weil had believed that we progress toward truth or the good through our own efforts – by obeying the heart’s impulses, as we have noted, and by focusing all our energies on the good we desire. Her awareness of powerlessness in the face of death, however, made her realize that at a certain point on the spiritual journey all we can do is wait. By accepting death and powerlessness, without denying the heart’s longing, we position ourselves to *receive* the good. Christianity teaches that the good comes to us.

Weil would begin to learn this firsthand. She went to Portugal with her parents to recover from the shattering experience of factory work. One night, in a little fishing village, she observed a procession of fishermen’s wives making a candlelit tour of all the ships, singing “ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness.” Touched to the core of her own heart, she came to an insight: “Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves,”

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she thought; “slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.”¹⁶

Weil returned to teaching in 1935 at a lycée at Bourges. In 1936, she trained for action on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, but due to an accident – she scalded herself by stepping into a pot of boiling oil – she never saw combat. Back in France, she taught philosophy at the Lycée Saint-Quentin, but in January of 1938, she took sick leave from her job and never returned to teaching.

The frustration and debility Weil experienced in her outer life at this time was paralleled by an impasse interiorly. In her spiritual autobiography, Weil says that she “persevered for ten years” – before and after her time in the factory – “in an effort of concentrated attention that was practically unsupported by any hope of results.”¹⁷ But beginning with a visit to Assisi in 1937, she had a series of spiritual breakthroughs. Still an agnostic, Weil, now twenty-eight, had never prayed, but in the chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, once frequented by Saint Francis, “something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees.”¹⁸ In 1938, she spent Holy Week

and Easter attending the services at the Benedictine abbey in Solesmes. Her headaches were raging, but by an extreme effort of attention she was able, she says, “to rise above this wretched flesh . . . and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words.” In this experience, she said, “the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.”¹⁹

These experiences were the prelude to the climactic moment of her life. A young Englishman at Solesmes had introduced her to the works of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets and she formed the habit of reciting the poem “Love,” by George Herbert, whenever her headaches were particularly intense. During one of these recitations, she tells us, “Christ himself came down and took possession of me.”²⁰ As if defending the authenticity of the experience, not only to Jean Perrin, the Catholic priest to whom her spiritual autobiography is addressed, but also to herself, she says that “neither my senses nor my imagination had any part” in it; she only felt “in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face.”²¹ Weil was completely unprepared for this encounter with Christ.

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Having never read the mystics, she had never conceived of the possibility of a “real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God.”²² This experience, not surprisingly, led Weil to rethink many of her intellectual positions. It also raised the question of baptism.

For the next several years, Weil’s life, which to that point had been taken up in the great political struggles of the day, took an inward turn. She wrote about the rise of totalitarianism in Germany and Russia, but her chief focus was religion. She read the Gospels and was immediately convinced that Jesus is God, but she also studied classical texts from non-Christian religions, finding resonances therein with her own unexpected mystical encounters. She had always loved the Greeks, but now as she read her favorite authors – Plato and Homer – she found the former to be a mystic and the latter to be “bathed in Christian light.”²³ Indeed, she found “intimations of Christianity” throughout Greek literature, from the early myths through the great tragedians.²⁴ This confirmation of the universality of mystical experiences like hers, coupled with the Catholic Church’s exclusive claim to be the vehicle of God’s presence in the world, was the greatest

impediment to her joining the church. It pained her that the church was catholic (universal) “by right but not in fact,” having condemned so much in the world and throughout history that was good.²⁵ She explained to Perrin, who greatly desired her baptism, that her place was not inside the church, but “on the threshold . . . at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity.”²⁶

Another obstacle to becoming Christian, for Weil, was the church as a social structure. She feared the collective enthusiasm of Christians, noting that it had blinded even saints on occasion – an egregious example being those who approved of the Crusades. She admitted that her own temperament was such that she would be highly susceptible to the emotion of “church patriotism,” going so far as to say that “if at this moment I had before me a group of twenty young Germans singing Nazi songs in chorus, a part of my soul would instantly become Nazi.”²⁷ Weil’s rejection of church membership on these grounds is in line with her lifelong dedication to purity of heart. She acknowledged the need for the church as a social structure if it were going to exist in the world at all, but could never regard participation in it as anything

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other than a compromise with her own spiritual vocation. In her New York journal, written just a year before her death, she puts it quite categorically: “The virtue of humility is incompatible with the sense of belonging to a social group chosen by God, whether a nation or a church.”²⁸

When the Nazis invaded France in 1940, Weil fled with her parents to Marseilles, in the unoccupied zone. She developed deep friendships with Christians there, but held to her decision to remain outside the church. Offered lodging in the home of one of her Catholic friends, she chose to live in a shed on his property instead and spent her days in the fields doing exhausting manual labor. By night, she filled notebooks with her mystical vision of reality. What particularly engaged Weil during this period was the question of how to reconcile the love that God has for us, which she was experiencing more and more deeply, with the horrendous suffering that so many people have to endure. The year in the factory had taught her that extreme, soul-crushing suffering – what she calls “affliction” – is real and its existence, in a world created by God, seemed scandalous to her. “It is surprising,” she writes, “that God has given affliction the power

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to seize the very souls of the innocent and to take possession of them as their sovereign Lord.”²⁹ Only the Passion of Christ, she believed, could overcome this contradiction. The perfect love of Jesus on the cross reveals the presence of divine love in the midst of affliction. By remaining open to divine love when we are afflicted ourselves, we participate in Christ’s redemptive act.

With the war raging, Weil also reflected on the use of force. In her earliest writings, in the 1930s, she had championed pacifism. Now she renounced it, referring to “the criminal error I committed before 1939” (when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia) “with regard to pacifist groups and their actions.”³⁰ Weil admired Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance, but believed that it should only be used when truly effective; that is, when its proponents radiate the power of love so strongly that their cause is irresistible. Otherwise, she proposed, the responsibility to protect innocent human life supersedes the commandment against killing. If a soldier is willing to die in the service of the good, Weil asserted, he has the right to kill when war is necessary. Dismayed by the capitulation of France to Hitler, she supported the French Resistance wholeheartedly. In July of 1942,

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she accompanied her parents to New York. As Jews, they were in danger under the Vichy regime, but she knew that they would never leave France without her. Four months later, however, she returned to Europe; she had contacts who would enable her to work with de Gaulle's Free French in London.

In New York, Weil had penned a prayer which some commentators refer to as "the terrible prayer." She asks to be so identified with Christ's suffering that what is left of her is an empty shell of a human being: "That I may be unable to will any bodily movement . . . like a total paralytic. That I may be incapable of receiving any sensation. . . . That I may be unable to make the slightest connection between two thoughts." Whatever knowledge and love she possesses she asks to be "stripped away, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance and given for food to the afflicted whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment."³¹ The prayer indicates that in her own being Weil wants to resolve the contradiction between human suffering and divine love. By becoming totally emptied of self, through the acceptance of affliction, there would be, she thought, a pure exchange of love between God and the spirit of God within her. The extremity of suffering

depicted in Weil's request is disturbing, yet it reveals not the masochism which some have suggested, but rather the ultimate expression of her lifelong desire to know the truth. This desire has become, at this point, the desire to be one with God. It is the expression of her soul, and the enactment of the soul's desires, as we know, can do violence to the self. What lover, in the fevered ecstasy of her love, has not proclaimed her desire to die for the sake of the beloved?

Working for the Free French in London, Weil certainly seemed intent on dying. She asked to be sent behind enemy lines as a covert operator, but her classically Jewish looks and physical awkwardness ruled that out. Another plan was for a corps of front line nurses: unarmed, she and other intrepid souls would brave enemy fire to treat the wounded. (When the idea reached General de Gaulle, he is said to have exclaimed, "*elle est fou!*" – she is crazy.) Weil's literary production was significant during her time in London. Besides the usual reports and memoranda, she wrote *The Need for Roots*, a treatise addressing the problem of how to rebuild French society after the war. But the whole time, she was like a mother distraught because her children are suffering while she is kept from them.

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Just as she had at the age of five, she fasted to practice solidarity with the men at the front. This time, though, she refused not just sugar, but nearly everything, restricting herself to what she believed to be the rations of those on the front. It is likely that she ate even less. During the summer of 1943, she contracted tuberculosis, and in late August, she died, being too weakened by malnourishment for her body to recover. The attending physician declared her death a suicide, but in the context of her whole life's journey, we can say that she died of an excess of love.

Since her death, Weil's life and work have been the subject of praise and controversy. She has been labeled "anorexic" and "self-hating"; her religious sense has been called that of a life-denying Gnostic. Susan Sontag writes, "No one who loves life would wish to imitate her dedication to martyrdom nor would wish it for his children nor for anyone else whom he loves."³² The purpose of this volume is neither to hold Simone Weil up as a paragon of spiritual understanding and Christian discipleship, nor to pass judgment on her distinctive spiritual journey and mystical writings. Instead, it will, I hope, quicken in the reader that sense of the eternal

which Weil had to an extreme degree. Her gift to all those sincere in seeking the truth is the way she points to the reality of God. Like all mystics, she reminds us that our souls will not be satisfied with anything else. While others have used music and poetry to convey this discovery, Weil expressed it through a life of self-denial. She wanted nothing about herself – in her life or in her writings – to distract from her role as witness. Thanks to her, those of us not similarly focused can catch a glimpse of “that transcendent kingdom” which she came to know.

If we hesitate to emulate, or even to approve of, Weil’s path and her ideas in their entirety, still her intensity in the pursuit of the truth should fill us with gratitude. She discovered, much to her surprise, that her pursuit of truth was, finally, the pursuit of Christ. In this, she points a way toward Christ for those who struggle with institutional religion, showing that Christ makes himself known not through dogma or obedience to religious authorities, but to those who follow the deepest desire of their hearts. *Laurie Gagne*

The Right Use of School Studies

“We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.”

We often think of prayer as the fervent expression of our needs or heartfelt desires to God. For Simone Weil, however, prayer is a frame of mind that leads to illumination. We pray not to change our circumstances, but to change ourselves, and specifically, to increase our capacity for loving attention, which is the one thing that can really help the downhearted and broken-spirited among us. In this essay, which she titled “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” Weil suggests that school studies, when properly pursued, form in us the habit of waiting on the truth, which prepares us for the higher-level waiting – waiting on God – that is prayer. As she develops her argument, Weil is clearly drawing on her own experiences of “wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem” during her student years, which ultimately bore fruit in the mystical encounters of her adult life.

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THE KEY TO A CHRISTIAN conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. The quality of attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.

It is the highest part of the attention only which makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established; but the whole attention is turned toward God.

Of course school exercises only develop a lower kind of attention. Nevertheless, they are extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer, on condition that they are carried out with a view to this purpose and this purpose alone.

Although people seem to be unaware of it today, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies. Most school tasks have a certain intrinsic interest as well, but such an interest is secondary. All tasks that really call upon the power of attention are interesting for the same reason and to an almost equal degree.

School children and students who love God should never say: "For my part I like mathematics"; "I like

French”; “I like Greek.” They should learn to like all these subjects, because all of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer.

If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry, this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary, it is almost an advantage.

It does not even matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so. Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind.

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another, more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer. Moreover, it may very likely be felt in some department of the

intelligence in no way connected with mathematics. Perhaps he who made the unsuccessful effort will one day be able to grasp the beauty of a line of Racine³³ more vividly on account of it. But it is certain that this effort will bear its fruit in prayer. There is no doubt whatever about that.

Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience that leads to such certainties. There is a kind of contradiction here. Above a given level this is the case with all useful knowledge concerning spiritual progress. If we do not regulate our conduct by it before having proved it, if we do not hold on to it for a long time by faith alone, a faith at first stormy and without light, we shall never transform it into certainty. Faith is the indispensable condition.

The best support for faith is the guarantee that if we ask our Father for bread, he does not give us a stone. Quite apart from explicit religious belief, every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit. An Eskimo

story explains the origin of light as follows: “In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for light, and the earth was illumined.” If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it. There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention. It is really light that is desired if all other incentives are absent. Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul. Every effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away. The useless efforts made by the Curé d’Ars,³⁴ for long and painful years, in his attempt to learn Latin bore fruit in the marvelous discernment that enabled him to see the very soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences.

Students must therefore work without any wish to gain good marks, to pass examinations, to win school successes; without any reference to their natural abilities and tastes; applying themselves equally to all their tasks, with the idea that each one will help to form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer. When we set out to do a piece of work, it is necessary to wish to do it correctly, because such a wish is indispensable in any true effort. Underlying

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this immediate objective, however, our deep purpose should aim solely at increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer; as, when we write, we draw the shape of the letter on paper, not with a view to the shape, but with a view to the idea we want to express. To make this the sole and exclusive purpose of our studies is the first condition to be observed if we are to put them to the right use.

The second condition is to take great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second rate it is, without seeking any excuse or overlooking any mistake or any of our tutor's corrections, trying to get down to the origin of each fault. There is a great temptation to do the opposite, to give a sideways glance at the corrected exercise if it is bad, and to hide it forthwith. Most of us do this nearly always. We have to withstand this temptation. Incidentally, moreover, nothing is more necessary for academic success, because, despite all our efforts, we work without making much progress when we refuse to give our attention to the faults we have made and our tutor's corrections.

Above all, it is thus that we can acquire the virtue of humility, and that is a far more precious treasure

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than all academic progress. From this point of view it is perhaps even more useful to contemplate our stupidity than our sin. Consciousness of sin gives us the feeling that we are evil, and a kind of pride sometimes finds a place in it. When we force ourselves to fix the gaze, not only of our eyes but of our souls, upon a school exercise in which we have failed through sheer stupidity, a sense of our mediocrity is borne in upon us with irresistible evidence. No knowledge is more to be desired. If we can arrive at knowing this truth with all our souls we shall be well established on the right foundation.

If these two conditions are perfectly carried out there is no doubt that school studies are quite as good a road to sanctity as any other.

To carry out the second, it is enough to wish to do so. This is not the case with the first. In order really to pay attention, it is necessary to know how to set about it.

Most often attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort. If one says to one's pupils: "Now you must pay attention," one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles.

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We often expend this kind of muscular effort on our studies. As it ends by making us tired, we have the impression that we have been working. That is an illusion. Tiredness has nothing to do with work. Work itself is the useful effort, whether it is tiring or not. This kind of muscular effort in work is entirely barren, even if it is made with the best of intentions. Good intentions in such cases are among those that pave the way to hell. Studies conducted in such a way can sometimes succeed academically from the point of view of gaining marks and passing examinations, but that is in spite of the effort and thanks to natural gifts; moreover, such studies are never of any use.

Will power, the kind that, if need be, makes us set our teeth and endure suffering, is the principal weapon of the apprentice engaged in manual work. But contrary to the usual belief, it has practically no place in study. The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade.

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It is the part played by joy in our studies that makes of them a preparation for spiritual life, for desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire alone draws God down. He only comes to those who ask him to come; and he cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often, and ardently.

Attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but it is a negative effort. Of itself, it does not involve tiredness. When we become tired, attention is scarcely possible anymore, unless we have already had a good deal of practice. It is better to stop working altogether, to seek some relaxation, and then a little later to return to the task; we have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out.

Twenty minutes of concentrated, untired attention is infinitely better than three hours of the kind of frowning application that leads us to say with a sense of duty done: "I have worked well!"

But, in spite of all appearances, it is also far more difficult. Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why

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every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate with this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than a great many good works.

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.

All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style, and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active; we have wanted to carry out a search. This can be proved every time, for every

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fault, if we trace it to its root. There is no better exercise than such a tracing down of our faults, for this truth is one to be believed only when we have experienced it hundreds and thousands of times. This is the way with all essential truths.

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. We cannot discover them by our own powers, and if we set out to seek for them we will find in their place counterfeits of which we will be unable to discern the falsity.

The solution of a geometry problem does not in itself constitute a precious gift, but the same law applies to it because it is the image of something precious. Being a little fragment of particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: "I am the Truth."

Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament.

Learning to Love God

“The veiled form of love necessarily comes first. . . .”

Like Augustine, Simone Weil believed that we first love God through things in the world. For her, the heart’s leap in response to a beautiful sight, to a neighbor in distress, or to a religious ceremony (she spent many hours in the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes near Paris) was a real, if indirect, experience of the love of God. The mystic may eventually learn to love God in an unmediated way, but everyone can be a friend of God through his various disguises.

The introduction below and the following three chapters are excerpted from an extended essay, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God.”

SINCE THE COMMANDMENT “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God”³⁵ is laid upon us so imperatively, it is to be inferred that the love in question is not only the love

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a soul can give or refuse when God comes in person to take the hand of his future bride, but also a love preceding this visit, for a permanent obligation is implied.

This previous love cannot have God for its object, since God is not present to the soul and has never yet been so. It must then have another object. Yet it is destined to become the love of God. We can call it the indirect or implicit love of God.

This holds good even when the object of such love bears the name of God, for we can then say either that the name is wrongly applied or that the use of it is permissible only on account of the development bound to follow later.

The implicit love of God can have only three immediate objects, the only three things here below in which God is really though secretly present. These are religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and our neighbor. Accordingly there are three loves.

To these three loves friendship should perhaps be added; strictly speaking it is distinct from the love of our neighbor.

These indirect loves have a virtue that is exactly and rigorously equivalent. It depends on circumstances, temperament, and vocation which is the first to enter the soul; one or other of them is dominant during the

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period of preparation. It is not necessarily the same one for the whole of this period.

It is probable that in most cases the period of preparation does not draw toward its end; the soul is not ready to receive the personal visit of its Master unless it has in it all three indirect loves to a high degree.

The combination of these loves constitutes the love of God in the form best suited to the preparatory period, that is to say a veiled form.

They do not disappear when the love of God in the full sense of the word wells up in the soul; they become infinitely stronger and all loves taken together make only a single love.

The veiled form of love necessarily comes first, however, and often reigns alone in the soul for a very long time. Perhaps, with a great many people, it may continue to do so till death. Veiled love can reach a very high degree of purity and power.

At the moment when it touches the soul, each of the forms that such love may take has the virtue of a sacrament.

