



SEEDS

March 2006

GOOD NEWS *Associates*

13730 15th Ave NE , A302, Seattle, WA 98125

www.goodnewsassoc.org

Where do you see God in this?

by M. Susanne Kromberg

It is my privilege as a spiritual director to accompany people on their journey through this life together with God. They look for the presence of God, for invitations to wholeness, as they seek to serve God by serving people. We know God is there, and I get to ask the question "Where do you see God in this?" or even to point to the footprints of God when at times they are obscured from my clients' view.

One day, a young man whom I will call Eric (not his real name) came to me to ask me to be his spiritual director. He said: "I've been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Spirits talk to me and they show me the future."

My first instinct was to say no. Many spiritual directors would advise me to avoid a client whose experiences might be better understood and handled with the tools of psychiatry. Yet, as I listened to Eric's story, while my head was saying "no," my heart was saying "yes." I felt that I could and did want to walk with him. God works in mysterious ways.

"As the deer pants for streams of living water, so my soul thirsts for you, O God. Our souls pant for God, for the living God." Psalm 42

If I who have so many blessings – my dear husband, my lively and strong daughters, a comfortable home, work that I love – still call out, longing to walk with my God in the garden, how much more must a mentally ill person desire to walk with and be comforted by God!

For someone who is alone, whose friends have left her, whose husband has divorced her and taken her children away, who has lost her job and home – all due to hallucinations and impulses – how much more must she need the presence and comfort of God?

Where is God for a mentally ill person?

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39

How could God **not** be present in mental illness? And must someone with Eric's struggles be left to find God on his own?

And yet, as I walked away from our first meeting, having said "yes" to being Eric's spiritual director, I was wondering how on earth I would do this work. How would I know, while listening to his experiences, when to say "Talk to your psychiatrist about this" and when to say "What is God calling you to?" And how could I speak to him about it in a way that he would understand?

I thought about the times when God or Jesus has appeared to me and when I have woken up from sleep with the voice of God in my ears. I wondered how I would be able to explain the difference between the voice of God and the other voices my client might be hearing.

I thought about the times God has shown me what lay ahead for me in my life and the times when God has told me what to do. I thought about how, against reason and common sense sometimes, I have changed the course of my life because of something God told me to do. I thought about how offended I have been when, as sometimes happens, someone has dismissed my religious experiences as "just a delusion." What if someone told me that the vision I once had of Jesus on the cross was just a psychotic break and that I had "a religious fixation?" These are the experiences that my life is built on, indeed that I stake my life on.

Psychiatrists get paid by insurance companies to manage or eliminate their patients' symptoms. By choice or coercion, psychiatrists are often confined to treating every voice or image as unreal. Must a psychiatric patient lose the image and Word of God, too, in addition to everything else they have lost? Must they treat everything they see and hear, which is not heard or seen by everybody else, as a problem?

If I believe that God comforts those who are in need, then surely God is there with Eric when voices threaten punishment for past bad deeds. As he tries to determine whether this is God speaking or someone else, how do I help him distinguish between the true voice of God and the other voices? And in fact, who am I to say which voices are from God and which are not? How can I, a mere mortal, presume to know the will of God?

As a person of faith, I cannot accept that Eric has to lose the Word of God. I can't accept that he has to reject every voice, vision and impulse. This I have learnt: I can judge by the fruits. My situation with Eric is no different than it is with anyone else, because the fruits of the Spirit accompany experiences that are trustworthy.

Except in the acute stages of the illness, when only medication seems helpful, I find that when I approach someone like Eric with openness to the possibility that the images he has seen and the voice he has heard may indeed be from God, he or she is eager to learn how to tell the difference. Does an experience lead to life abundant or into the abyss? First we talk about a time he can identify, with certainty, as being a time of closeness to God. I have him describe what it is like. This experience becomes the yardstick for measuring whether other experiences are of God. We look at Galatians 5:22 together. Is the experience one of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Does it lead into a closer relationship with the people he loves? Or do the words from Galatians 5:19 apply? Does it bring hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy? Does it cause distance between him and the people he loves?

Perhaps more importantly, a genuine calling from God will persist over time, even if we try to ignore it. An impulse that is not from God usually fades away if it is ignored. And a true calling can be confirmed by others. So I tell Eric that when he feels an urge or hears a voice he can safely try to set it aside for a while and consult with others about it. He can trust that God will give him another chance to act – if it truly is God's will that he do so.

I feel blessed that I have been called to walk alongside Eric and others whose struggles are similar to his, asking "Where do you see God in this?" And it is my privilege to be able to repeat the promise of what the future holds: *"Surely goodness and love will follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*



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