

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Marcus, *In Search of the Spiritual: Gabriel Marcel, Psychoanalysis, and the Sacred*. (London: Karnac Books, 2013), 218pp.

One could question Paul Marcus' choice of title for this work. The themes of spirituality and the sacred are central, so too is the discourse of psychoanalysis and the thought of Gabriel Marcel. Still, one may ask whether the text would be more aptly titled *Witness to the Spiritual* or *Living the Spiritual*. What the reader encounters in Marcus' text is less an author who is in search of the spiritual and more an author who has discovered the sacred and experienced spiritual fulfillment. One encounters an author who has developed his spiritual life through his history of psychoanalytic practice and theorizing, his ordeal with cancer, and his encounters with the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. Marcus, most essentially, offers living witness to what it means to live spiritually and to experience the sacred.

As a living witness to the spiritual, the reader of Marcus' text encounters a deeply personal reflection. The personal nature of Marcus' text, far from discrediting the insights within it, is in keeping with his main interlocutors. Marcus effectively highlights the personalist foundation of Gabriel Marcel's literary and philosophic compendium and he makes the case for psychoanalysis as a practice rooted in an effort to help individuals understand their own personhood. Marcus' exploration of the personal is not, however, an exercise in self-absorption. If one were to identify a thematic that runs throughout his text, it is that salvation and fulfillment occur when one moves from a narcissistic, self-absorbed orientation toward genuine communion with others. For Marcus, spiritual fulfillment is achieved and the sacred is encountered in those moments when the boundaries of self-absorption are surpassed and an authentic openness to others is realized. These others include human persons, the non-human world, and the deity residing at the heart of experience. This is a text, therefore, that ought to be read just as much, if not more so, for its capacity to light the way for one's own spiritual enlightenment as for the valuable scholarly insights it contains.

Moving from an egotistic orientation to a genuine encounter with others is the central theme of Marcus' work and one could equally describe it as Marcel's preeminent preoccupation. As the philosopher Merold Westphal says in his introduction to one of Marcel's most significant philosophical contributions, *Creative Fidelity* (Fordham, 2002): "It doesn't seem to matter what Marcel chooses to talk about; the next thing you know he is reflecting on some dimension of my relation to the Other (the self, the person, the thou with whom I find myself engaged)" (p.ix). Marcus exemplifies the Marcelian tendency to think reality through the lens of inter-subjectivity. In chapters devoted to creativity, hope in the midst of cancer surgery and an ensuing chemotherapy, grace, humility, courage, the relationship between fidelity and betrayal with regard to love, and, finally, kissing, Marcus alerts his readers to how an egotistic orientation can, at a great loss to the egotist, disrupt the possibility of genuine relationships. But, while the snares of egotism are deeply embedded within Marcus' text, *In Search of the Spiritual* is clearly not an exercise in despair.

Marcus' text is a work of hope. As Marcus tells it:

I ‘re-found’ [Marcel’s]...writings on hope to be the most compelling of his entire *oeuvre*. In this context, Marcel the ‘believing’ Catholic, the “neo-Socratic” or ‘Christian Socratic’ philosopher, as he preferred to be called, greatly “moved” me, a traditional Jew and a seasoned psychoanalyst, and helped me get through, more-or-less in one piece, though changed to be sure, a challenging if not devastating diagnosis of stage three colon cancer, surgery, and chemotherapy (pp.2-3).

The Marcelian hope that Marcus poignantly invokes in this passage, and one which he examines throughout the text, is founded on the notion that meaning, fulfillment, and the ability to face the challenges of life are only realized in relationships where one has opened oneself—to the point of donating oneself—to others. Hence, while each of Marcus’ chapters alert the reader to how the ever-present temptation of self-absorption can lead one to despair and culminate in depression, each chapter is no less clear with regard to how a receptive orientation offers a path to authentic happiness.

While traversing the total landscape of Marcus’ spiritually therapeutic insights is far too grand for a book review, I hope that a more detailed exposition of one of Marcus’ chapters will be of use in gaining a greater appreciation of the methodology of his text and the nature of its subject matter. Marcus’ eighth chapter, “On fidelity and betrayal in love relationships,” is a particularly apt site for such an exploration. On display in this chapter are the subtle and not so subtle ways in which egotism can dissolve a human person’s dignity, the fulfillment present within authentic love relationships, and the creativity required to honor one’s commitments to others. Also on display is a high level Marcelian and psychoanalytic exegesis as well as concrete insights drawn from Marcus’ psychoanalytic practice.

At the heart of the chapter is a distinction between fidelity and betrayal. It is, however, not a distinction that is reducible to simplistic opposition. While, for Marcus, betrayal always involves some form of narcissistic subordination of the other, it is no less true that certain forms of fidelity—one may call them pseudo or counterfeit fidelities—are also driven by egotistic considerations. Beginning with an instance of counterfeit-fidelity, Marcus invokes Marcel’s distinction between constancy and fidelity. Constancy, which Marcel terms “the rational skeleton of fidelity,” (161) is “defined as the willful ‘perseverance in a certain goal,’ of ‘immutability,’ remaining the same, that is, contractually loyal, despite change or variation in other things” (pp.2-3). Marcus follows Marcel in understanding constancy primarily in egotistic terms. Constancy, a mode of being which often generates the appearance of genuine fidelity, is actually a commitment to oneself. Marcus outlines the topography of narcissistic constancy: One’s devotion to the other could be a form of looking at one’s commitment in terms of a test of will (I was strong enough to persevere), or the need to maintain a certain self-image (I truly am a loyal husband), or a way to assuage guilt (my sins are expiated due to my loyalty). But, Marcus argues, even more than a form of counterfeit fidelity—counterfeit insofar as one’s actions are not truly for the other—there is a deep and incredibly subtle form of betrayal in a fidelity that essentially uses another to satisfy one’s needs.

Marcus gives real life expression to this form of counterfeit fidelity. Based upon sessions with his patient, “Noah,” Marcus recounts the story of a seemingly noble, even heroic husband, who refuses to abandon a twenty-five year marriage to a woman who hates and emotionally tortures him. He ostensibly stays in the marriage for the benefit of his three children and out of the conviction that his wife’s behavior is a result of mental illness. But, Marcus surmises, the

deeper reason for remaining in the marriage is that “Noah was bound, tied, and gagged by a neurotic need to be perceived as the ‘rescuer’ and the ‘good guy’” (174). For reasons too complex to be detailed here, this man endured a conflict-ridden and seemingly miserable marriage in order to maintain a self-image that was in keeping with his most hidden but powerful psychological needs. Marcus argues that the result of such subtle self-deception is not that the man “rescued” his wife, but that they continued “to live in a toxic co-dependency in which each [became]...the other’s jailer, cut off from any remotely reasonable adult-to-adult love” (p.176). Marcus, like Marcel, is convinced that narcissism ultimately imprisons, even destroys, the narcissist.

The contrast between self-sabotaging self-absorption and a receptivity that allows for genuine relationships is perhaps best captured in the Marcelian quote that opens the chapter: “Nothing is lost for a man—I am convinced of this and I firmly believe it—if he experiences a great love or a true friendship, but everything is lost for one who is alone” (155). An authentic form of love, along with the fidelity that flows from it, occurs when one offers oneself to another as a presence. One allows oneself to become present to the other. One offers oneself and it is an offering constituted by a gracious gift of one’s time and attention. One offers oneself not in the sense of a loan that the other ought to repay or a carefully calculated donation that one monitors so as not to give too much. In being present, one offers oneself with the end of becoming attuned to the needs and dispositions of the other. Such presence disallows the inflexible and rigid orientation of one who is merely constant. One whose relationship is based on constancy is preoccupied with him or herself, whereas the creatively faithful lover is one attuned to the other in such a way that he/she is receptive to changing needs, desires, and challenges faced both by the beloved and the lover. Such creative fidelity, for both Marcus and Marcel, is a commitment to love no matter what, but not a promise that this love will require an unalterable form of behavior, desire, or response.

Such attuned commitment requires that the boundary separating oneself from the other is overcome. It requires that I and the other, while not fused, participate in a shared reality. The richness that is achieved in such a shared reality—a richness defined in terms of deep satisfaction and fulfillment—is a primary reason why both Marcus and Marcel find love, as opposed to self-absorption, to be salvific. Marcus’ invocation of the following Marcelian thought captures the point beautifully: “Love, in so far as distinct from desire or as opposed to desire, love treated as the subordination of the self to a superior reality, a reality at my deepest level more truly me than I am myself—love as the breaking of the tension between the self and the other, appears to me to be what one might call the essential ontological datum” (p.3). Love is “the essential ontological datum” because love allows for authentic communion, and it is communion with others that most essentially and most completely fulfills what it means to be human. For Marcus and Marcel, the phrase “we are” captures the apogee of human life far more than an orientation focused on “I am.”

While the preceding only touches upon the eighth chapter of Marcus’ text, it is an emblematic selection. Marcus does justice to Marcel as a scholar and he supplements Marcel’s already rich existential discourses with his own insights, insights derived from one attuned to the glories and distresses of incarnate personhood. One may take aim at certain elements of Marcus’ scholarship—Freud, for instance, is invoked sporadically. One is left to wonder whether Marcus’ reading of Freud through Marcelian concepts fits too nicely into the central narrative of Marcus’ text. Freud is controversially presented as a thinker whose central aim is to guide others to a place where they can participate in the joy of a deeply spiritual, although not necessarily

religious, life. Another area where more thoroughgoing scholarship is called for are instances where Marcus brings Marcel into the orbit of psychoanalytic theory. Marcus suggests that Marcel would be deeply sympathetic to psychoanalytic theory, perhaps a near psychoanalytic theorist himself. It is a claim that deserves attention, especially given Marcus' ability to show how psychoanalytic practitioners are, like Marcel, interested in freeing individuals from unhealthy egotistic attachments. Yet it is also a claim that deserves greater scrutiny. Certain Marcel scholars, such as Thomas Busch, view Marcel in opposition to Freud holding that what sets Marcel's work off from the dominant philosophical work of our Freudian, post-Marxist era, is that his thought is animated by a fundamental trust in the intelligibility and worth of existence. In light of such a view, further developing the connection between Marcel and psychoanalytic theory would do much in terms of establishing the connection as legitimate as well as shedding greater light on both schools of thought.

Yet, while a deeper engagement with Freudian scholarship, including the link between Freudian psychoanalysis and Marcel, would have been useful to an academic audience, the fact remains that this work is primarily meant as a guide. It is meant to guide others to a place of spiritual enlightenment or, at the least, to offer spiritual insight. Marcus offers this insight primarily from the perspective of Marcelian thought as well as his own psychoanalytic understanding and practice. In this regard, his work is a triumph. In fact, if I were allowed one serious misgiving about the text, it would be that Marcus' own personal story could occupy a more prominent and consistent place within it.

One of the most powerful chapters in the book centers on Marcus' "devastating" but ultimately salvific ordeal with "stage three colon cancer" (p.2-3). Marcus recounts how the ordeal shattered his previously attained sense of personal security and re-invoked early childhood trauma. His existence came to be defined by precariousness. His well-being, even survival, was quite literally thrust into the hands of others. Even following his surgery, the threat of death occupied an ever-present moment of his consciousness via post-cancer checkups. As Marcus so eloquently puts it, "one is ... thrown into a state of radical vulnerability as one waits to see if the cancer comes back—'Life is a place to hang out in between CAT scans'" (p.58). In the midst of such vulnerability, succumbing to despair is an ever-present temptation, perhaps to the point where it seems recommended. But, as Marcus attests via the elegance of his autobiography, such vulnerability also opens a gateway to salvation. Salvation becomes possible in the sense that the ordeal allowed him to gain a deeper sense of humility. Reliance on others, trust in others, empathy with those in similar plights, hope in something other than oneself, perhaps even beyond the limits of temporal life, were modes of Marcus' life hitherto un- or, at least, under-realized. The humility that stands in contrast to the pride of self-willed autonomy allowed, Marcus argues, the possibility of deeper relations not only with others, but with the divine.

The reader who journeys with Marcus through the recounting of his cancer ordeal is privileged. One better appreciates the depth to which cancer in particular and serious illness in general can shatter a human person's reality. One also benefits from the hope able to reside precisely in the depths of such ordeal. It is this journey that I wish would remain a more prominent and consistent presence in the text. One is left with the sense that Marcus has more to offer with regard to his cancer experience and that such an offering would enhance his already worthwhile insights with regard to spirituality, Gabriel Marcel, and psychoanalysis. Perhaps one will have to wait for Marcus' next work. But despite the fact that the reader is left wanting more, it is clear that this courageous author leaves one with much. Whether a scholar of Marcel, an

adherent of psychoanalysis, or simply someone interested in the human condition, this is a work that deserves not to be read, but to be experienced.

Geoffrey Karabin

Neumann University