

## **Speaking of Mystery: Evil and Death in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel and the Resulting Pastoral Applications**

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*Abstract:* The much discussed “problem of evil” poses challenges to not only the academic philosopher but also to the pastoral minister. Evil is experienced most concretely by persons when they encounter the reality of death and dying. How is a minister or counselor to serve the dying and the bereaved in a manner that avoids both extremes of pietistic platitudes and despair? In this paper I am suggesting that the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel offers a solution to this issue. Specifically, his contribution lies in viewing evil in general and death in particular as a mystery and not a problem. By locating death in the realm of mystery, Marcel is able to argue for the possibility of transcendence and hope rather than despair. Thus, the role of the minister or counselor is to aide dying persons and their bereaved loved ones to embrace the mystery of death and be open to a new horizon of hope. In this paper, I will a) discuss the Marcelian distinction between problem and mystery, b) discuss Marcel’s position on evil in general and death in particular with an emphasis on the roles played by communion, hope, and presence, and c) apply this philosophical vision of Marcel to the work of the ministry with the dying and bereaved.

### **Introduction**

Evil is troubling both to the speculative academic and the pastoral minister. Although found in many instances of human life, evil is felt most concretely in experiences of death and bereavement. Any talk of hope or presence in the face of the evil of death may seem empty or absurd. How is one to think about the reality of evil? Concretely, how is one to minister to those who are suffering with their own impending death or the loss of a beloved? The philosophical vision of Gabriel Marcel offers an answer to these questions. At the heart of his proposal is the distinction between a problem and a mystery. According to Marcel, most of the philosophical tradition errs in viewing evil in general and death in particular as problems to be solved. Marcel views death and bereavement to be concrete and intensely personal encounters with evil, thus falling into the category of mystery rather than problem. Because it is a concretization of the larger mystery of evil, death is able to open up into the transcendental realm of being that offers hope to the human person in the face of despair. Viewing death in this manner offers a foundation and framework to the minister who serves the dying and bereaved. While avoiding the unhelpful extremes of heightened piety or absurdist despair, the minister—following the Marcelian framework of mystery—can assist the dying and bereaved to be open to deeper levels of mystery and thus predispose themselves to the experience of transcendence and hope.

This paper will begin by describing the distinction made by Marcel between problem and mystery. Following this, I will demonstrate how Marcel classifies evil as being a mystery and why death is an important concretization of the greater mystery of evil. This discussion will further show how viewing death as a Marcelian mystery allows one to escape the despair often

associated with death and be open to the experiences of transcendence, hope, and presence. Finally, I will illustrate how Marcel's philosophical scheme is of use to the minister who cares for the dying and bereaved. In this manner Marcel's philosophy will once again prove itself relevant as it continues to speak to the lived experience of persons.

## Problem and Mystery

In *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* we read, "A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce."<sup>1</sup> In the realm of the problematic, I encounter something, step back from my concrete circumstances in which the encounter took place, and attempt to evaluate the object of my experience in order to arrive at a conclusion. If I arrive at a conclusion to my problem, I can then share my findings with others. Marcel writes, "When I am dealing with a problem, I am trying to discover a solution that can become common property, that consequently can, at least in theory, be rediscovered by anyone at all."<sup>2</sup> Obvious examples of this problematic approach to knowledge would be science and mathematics. But what of mystery? Kenneth Gallagher provides four ways in which to discern a problem from a mystery. A problem is that which is external to the person doing the investigation, one for which a solution is at least theoretically possible, something that can be explored by anyone, and is governed by a mood of curiosity. When confronted by a problem, say a car that will not start or a computer slow to download, technique is key. In other words, if I only possessed the right skills or techniques the problem would be resolved. Enter the specialist, i.e. the mechanic or information technology support. Simply reversing Gallagher's description will provide us with a working definition of Marcelian mystery. First off, a mystery is internal to the person doing the investigation. Abstraction, removing myself from the question, objectifying the encounter, are not possibilities. When encountering mystery, I encounter myself and my own participation in the mystery under consideration.<sup>3</sup> Finding myself in the midst of mystery, I realize that no final solution is available. One can only embrace a sense of wonder and travel deeper. No expert can intervene to assist or critique my journey.

Before proceeding to the second section on the mysteries of evil and death, it is necessary to make a few clarifying comments concerning Marcel's treatment of problem and mystery. First off, it is important to stress that in distinguishing between these two approaches to knowledge, Marcel is not prizing one over the other. Indeed, he acknowledges that both are necessary for human existence. The scientist and the doctor must proceed in an abstract manner during their specific investigation of problems, whether an irregular heartbeat or fabricating a new chemical compound. Likewise, the theologian or philosopher is also justified in proceeding in her

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 117; hereinafter *BH*.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being-Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*, (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1950), p. 213; hereinafter, *MBI*

<sup>3</sup> Marcel speaks to the importance of personal participation in mystery when he reflects upon a person's investigation of the mystery of Being, "Ours is a being whose concrete essence is to be in every way *involved*, and therefore to find itself at grips with a fate which it must not only undergo, but must also make its own by somehow re-creating it from within...*So we see the problem of Being here encroaching upon its own data*, and being studied actually inside the subject who states it" (*BH*, pp. 116-117).

investigation of mysteries in which she as investigator is intimately involved.<sup>4</sup> In short, one might say that the human person encounters both problems and mysteries and must investigate each accordingly and resist the temptation of reducing the mysteries of life into problems.<sup>5</sup> Such a reduction will ultimately lead one to despair and choke off the possibility of transcendence and hope. In addition to asserting the necessity of both problems and mysteries in human existence, we must also state that although mysteries resist being reduced to conceptual terms and logical notation, they are not completely ineffable. Rather, mysteries, while intensely personal can be reflected upon and shared. Indeed, Marcel sees this as the task of philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

## Evil as Mystery

To understand Marcel's philosophical treatment of evil, we must first note his insistence that evil is a mystery that cannot be reduced to a problem. Hence the phrase "problem of evil" is incorrect.<sup>7</sup> Briefly put, evil is not an abstract problem but rather a mystery that one encounters as a "being-in-a-situation."<sup>8</sup> The lived experience of evil is not that of encountering a malfunction of some sort as in a car or computer. One's first instinct is not to call a specialist to diagnose the issue and supply the right part or procedure. Rather, "Free of our control in this way [being objectified], evil takes us unawares, it surprises us with its treachery, and does so in such a radical way that we are quite unable to locate who or what is to blame."<sup>9</sup> For Marcel, philosophical discussions of evil should begin—not from abstract musings on what 'evil' might mean<sup>10</sup>—but from the experience of the embodied person who encounters evil as unexpected

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<sup>4</sup> Brendan Sweetman comments on this Marcelian position in writing, "...he [Marcel] does not mean to advocate any kind of relativism, or to hold that conceptual knowledge is not important; he only wishes to illustrate where it fits into the analysis of the human subject and to point out that it is important to not overstate its range or its value," in *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Marcel comments on this temptation when he writes, "It is, no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem. But this is a fundamentally vicious proceeding, whose springs might perhaps be discovered in a kind of corruption of the intelligence" (*BH*, p. 117).

<sup>6</sup> Marcel speaks to this task of philosophy in relation to investigating the ontological mystery when he writes, "...the concrete approaches to the ontological mystery should not be sought in the scale of logical thought, the objective reference of which gives rise to a prior question. They should rather be sought in the elucidation of certain data which are spiritual in their right, such as fidelity, hope, and love, where we may see man at grips with the temptation of denial, introversion, and hard-heartedness" (*BH*, p. 119).

<sup>7</sup> When noting the human tendency to reduce mysteries to problems, Marcel names evil as a prime example, "The problem of evil, as the philosophers have called it, supplies us with a particularly instructive example of this degradation" (*BH*, p. 117).

<sup>8</sup> "Being-in-a-situation" is an important concept in Marcel's philosophy and aims at affirming the necessity of beginning philosophy with the concrete experience of the embodied person living in her unique context in the world and ultimately being a traveler or pilgrim. Marcel writes, "Let us ask ourselves whether the assumption that we can step outside of our skins in this spry and simple fashion is not merely an illusion or even a lie... There is not, and there cannot be, any global abstraction, any final high terrace to which we can climb by means of abstract thought, there to rest forever; for our condition in this world does remain, in the last analysis, that of a wanderer, and itinerant being..." (*MBI*, p. 133).

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 135; hereinafter *TWB*.

<sup>10</sup> "What clearly emerges from all of this is that anyone who attempts to reflect upon evil philosophically without taking into account the irreducible fact of the encounter with evil condemns himself to remaining outside of

threat, as an open chasm that threatens to swallow them. Evil often manifests itself as the occurrence of a particular tragedy in the life of a person. Such a tragedy threatens one's access to hope and meaning, thus leaving the door open to despair.<sup>11</sup>

Thus far we have noted that since evil is most often encountered as personal tragedy, it ought to be classified as mystery and reflected upon accordingly. If mysteries are not completely ineffable but may—to some extent—be communicated using concepts, then we may ask how it is that one should talk about the mystery of evil. In an attempt to define evil as clearly as its mysterious nature allows and to be true to the phenomenological method,<sup>12</sup> Marcel calls for a double affirmation. This consists in defining evil as a reality in the lives of people from which they suffer. Such a realist position is necessary to remain true to the lived experience of persons in the world who suffer from evil. It would be a betrayal of their pain to define evil as a sheer absence or the result of a deficiency in perception. The second aspect of this double affirmation is to conclude that in the final analysis evil is not real—or better said not permanent or eternal—in so much as human persons possess an intuitive sense that evil will be defeated. This double affirmation by Marcel is certainly not easy to understand. How is it that evil is real and felt by many people and yet is unreal in the sense that it does not have an absolute, enduring character? Marcel admits that his philosophical answer to evil is paradoxical in character. He justifies the assertion of paradox on the basis of the human person's ability to both be crushed by the sting of evil *and* to nourish faith in good's eventual triumph. Indeed, he employs the theological category of grace to account for the possibility of human hope in the face of evil. It is advantageous to quote him in full:

Many ways of facing the mystery of evil have proven to be misguided. Only one way really remains, and that is the acceptance of paradox in Kierkegaard's sense, of a double affirmation whose tension must be maintained. Evil is real. We cannot deny its reality without diminishing the basic seriousness of existence and thus falling into a kind of nonsense, a dreadful buffoonery. And yet evil is not real absolutely speaking. We have to arrive not so much at a certitude, but rather a faith in the possibility of overcoming it—not abstractly, of course, by adhering to a theory or theodicy, but *hic et nunc*. And this faith is not without grace. It is grace.<sup>13</sup>

Since we have placed evil in the realm of mystery, we can now consider a concrete and personal experience of evil that manifests its mysterious character, namely death. Marcel makes this connection between evil and death when he notes the insightful nature of the comment, “In the

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the subject he claims to be dealing with. Thus whatever he says will have no weight; it will be in contact not with reality but only with vague concepts” (*TWB*, p. 140).

<sup>11</sup> Marcel offers a concrete explication of his philosophy when he narrates, “Several months ago I heard about a young man bursting with energy and intelligence who seemed to be assured of a happy and fruitful life. Returning from a vacation, he felt a bit ill and, although he thought it could be nothing serious, he went to see his doctor. He went through certain tests, and X-ray examination, and so forth. The tests show that he had been stricken by an exceptionally virulent form of cancer, and that it was already too late for any kind of surgery, and that he would probably die in just a few months...And again evil presents itself as treason, as an unexpected treachery” (*TWB*, p. 137).

<sup>12</sup> “...in a strictly phenomenological fashion, that is to say, we are accepting our everyday experience and asking ourselves what implications we can draw from it” (*MBI*, p. 95).

<sup>13</sup> *TWB*, p. 146.

depths where evil appears, death invariably begins its work; evil announces death, evil is already death.”<sup>14</sup> Marcel conducts his philosophical investigation by asking why it is that death is experienced as an evil that tempts one to despair. For Marcel, evil—whether moral or cosmic—always tends toward the objectification of the person.<sup>15</sup> By being reduced to an object, we find ourselves located in the realm of the problematic. We are not able to see beyond our suffering to a horizon of hope because we are seeking a solution to our “problem” based on technique rather than attempting to open ourselves to faith in good’s triumph. Evil is that which reduces our perspective and tempts us to see our reality as objects in a problematized world.<sup>16</sup> In this flawed perspective death then appears as the most heinous of evils, as the central problem of my existence that can never be “fixed.” Living in a world which views all things as problems to be solved, we are doomed to frustration. Our body will eventually fail us and we will die. Mortality is the great equalizer.<sup>17</sup>

Marcel argues that death is troubling not so much in the abstract but in the personal and the particular. Thus it is not usually in some vague uneasiness over humanity’s mortality that I encounter the mystery of death, but rather in contemplating my own death and especially the death of those I love.<sup>18</sup> When someone whom I love has died, I experience this loss as personal injury or betrayal.<sup>19</sup> I fear that the mysterious evil of death which has taken away the biological life of my friend or lover has completely destroyed the communion I enjoyed with him. This fear can also be characterized as the temptation to despair or betrayal.<sup>20</sup> When faced with the death of my beloved, I am tempted to betray our love and surrender to the proposition that our bond is destroyed forever, that my lover is no different from a car that has ceased to function. In short, I am tempted to see death and love as problems concerning an object and not as mysteries concerning a subject.

In the face of this temptation, what is one to do? For Marcel, the answer lies in the arena of love; making the relational turn.<sup>21</sup> Marcel proposes that rather than turning in on myself in despair, I must reflect upon the actual inter-subjective experience of love that was enjoyed with

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *TWB*, p. 142. This idea also appears in Marcel’s *The Mystery of Being, Volume II: Faith and Reality*, (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), p. 144; hereinafter *MBII*.

<sup>15</sup> See Guillermine De Lacoste, “Concrete Encounter with Evil in Gabriel Marcel’s Drama,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 1996, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> For an expanded analysis of this Marcelian theme concerning the connection between evil, death, and the problematized world, see Jill Graper Hernandez’s, *Gabriel Marcel’s Ethics of Hope* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), Chs. 1-2; hereinafter, Hernandez, *Ethics*.

<sup>17</sup> Marcel speaks to this when he writes, “As for death, from this objective and functional point of view it appears only as a ceasing to function, falling into total uselessness, becoming sheer *waste* to be discarded,” quoted from “Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery,” in Katharine Rose Hanley (editor and translator) *Gabriel Marcel’s Perspectives on the Broken World* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1999), p. 174.

<sup>18</sup> This point is explicated by Marcel when he notes the error of philosophies that would only consider death in the abstract, “Instead of taking death *hic et nunc* as it comes to devastate a particular concrete life, to ruin a particular love, to interrupt brutally a particular communion, death is taken in general, where it concerns no one in particular...” (*TWB*, p. 142).

<sup>19</sup> “...it is certain that the fundamental problem arises for those to whom I am united by friendship, affection, or love, when their disappearance consists, as it were, in a personal injury or harm...that before the abyss created by the disappearance of a beloved one, I experience a different sort of disturbance than what I feel before my own ‘having-to-die.’” Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: An Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope* (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), pp. 288-289; hereinafter *HV*.

<sup>20</sup> See *HV*, p. 289.

<sup>21</sup> Hernandez, *Ethics*, p. 12.

the beloved. In short, one must ask whether the bond of love between us was completely conditioned by and dependent upon physical factors or spatial proximity? Or rather is it the case that the love shared between lover and beloved formed a “living link”<sup>22</sup> which gave a type of “prophetic assurance”<sup>23</sup> that our love was eternal?<sup>24</sup> It is in this context that Marcel investigates how one is to understand “presence” or the act of being present to another. Drawing from concrete human experience, he concludes that presence is not a matter of spatial proximity or physical closeness but rather is dependent upon communion between two subjects. We can experience the presence of one who is physically far from us and on the contrary feel rather distant from a stranger who sits next to us on the plane.<sup>25</sup> I am present to another person to the extent that I am able to become a center for my beloved and allow him to become a center for me. Communion is weakened and presence diminished when I view the other as object who is merely “there” and not as subject whom I must welcome and in whose being I participate. Thus I am justified in claiming my experience of ongoing communion with a lover who has died in so much as his presence was never dependent upon physical closeness. Indeed, our experience of loving presence provided a type of assurance that our communion as two subjects was eternal.<sup>26</sup> Marcel speaks to this when he writes, “The prophetic assurance of which I spoke above might be expressed fairly enough as follows: whatever changes may intervene in what I see before me, you and I will persist as one: the event that has occurred, and which belongs to the order of accident, cannot nullify the promise of eternity which is enclosed in our love, in our mutual pledge.”<sup>27</sup> Thus we may say that for Marcel authentic love, as communion and presence between two persons, gives the lovers a promise or hint of eternity.<sup>28</sup> This is the case because when I truly say and live the words “I love you” to another person, particularly in the case of marriage vows, I am making a claim about the beloved’s immortality. To unconditionally love another person is to perceive such value in them that I make a complete gift of myself. This total offering of self only make sense if I acknowledge—at least implicitly—that my lover will transcend death. Thomas Anderson speaks to this Marcelian theme when he writes:

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<sup>22</sup> *MBII*, p. 155.

<sup>23</sup> *MBII*, p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> Much like his broader analysis of one’s encounter with the mystery of evil, Marcel approaches the mystery of death with another type of “double affirmation” concerning the death of a beloved, “A bond is insufferably broken, but without totally being broken, because even with the sundering, and perhaps even more so than when the other was alive, I remain indissolubly tied to the one who now no longer lives. What is insufferable or intolerable is precisely this contradiction” (*HV*, p. 293).

<sup>25</sup> “...we can have a very strong feeling that someone who is there in the room, very close to us, someone whom we see and hear and whom we can touch, is nevertheless not present. He is infinitely farther from us than such a loved one who is thousands of miles away or who even no longer belongs to our world. What then is this presence which is here lacking...One could say that it is a communication without communion, and for that reason it is an unreal communication,” “Presence and Immortality,” in *Presence and Immortality* (Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquesne University Press, 1967), p. 237; hereinafter *PI*.

<sup>26</sup> “...the presence which I am thinking of is supra-hypothetical: it gives rise to an invincible assurance which is connected with oblation love. It expresses itself by some such affirmations as: ‘I am assured that you are present to me and this assurance is linked with the fact that you do not stop helping me, that you help me perhaps more directly than you could on earth...’” (*PI*, p. 242).

<sup>27</sup> *MBII*, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> “...there is no human love worthy of the name which does not represent for him who exercises it both a pledge and a seed of immortality...” (*HV*, p. 145).

...we can make sense of people's unconditional love for others, even to the extent of offering their lives for them, by saying that lovers experience their loved ones to participate in such a fullness of value that it requires a total response from them. Now such fullness of value, Marcel contends, would have to be imperishable—in other words, eternal—for it would make no sense to offer oneself completely to someone whose value will disappear.<sup>29</sup>

In order to overcome the temptation to despair by reflecting on love and continuing to embrace the presence of the beloved, one must transcend the realm of the problematic and learn to hope.<sup>30</sup> Hope is the means by which one continues a relationship of presence with the beloved even after she has died. Marcel defines hope as "...essentially the availability of a soul which has entered intimately enough into the experience of communion to accomplish in the teeth of the will and knowledge of the transcendent act—the act establishing the vital regeneration of which this experience affords both the pledge and the first-fruits."<sup>31</sup> Thus hope concerns an openness or availability emerging from the core of the person as a result of love (communion and presence). Despite all of the empirical 'evidences' and appeals to experience, hope refuses to believe that all options have been exhausted. This type of metaphysical hope can only function when one acknowledges the realm of mystery. If mired in the world of problems, the temptation to deny the possibility of ongoing presence will never be defeated. Indeed, one may succumb to the trap of acknowledging that our lover is gone forever and we have no way of "knowing" or "proving" that our relationship continues. It is in mystery that one is able to accept the fact that love and the promise of immortality and ongoing presence that it portends do not operate in the sphere of "proof."<sup>32</sup> Recognition of mystery then is key when confronting the evil of death in that it can free the bereaved to overcome the temptation to despair and embrace hope as a bridge to continual presence and eventual reunion.

### From Philosophy to Pastoral Care

Having discussed Marcel's understanding of evil as mystery and death as a concrete and common experience of evil's mysterious nature, we can now ask the question of application. It is my contention that Marcel's philosophy has much to offer to the minister who seeks to counsel the dying and bereaved. In this final section I will outline how Marcel's philosophical analysis of the evil of death particularly; the temptation to despair, the necessity of the relational turn, and the role of hope and enduring presence might be applied to caring for both the dying and bereaved. I will argue that the overall goal of the minister is to create space in which the dying and bereaved can forsake the realm of the problematic and embrace mystery. It is in mystery that peace and healing can be discovered.

Those who minister to the dying, particularly in a hospital or healthcare facility, know the inherent difficulties in this type of pastoral care. It seems that at the core of this difficulty is the utter uniqueness of each case, indeed of each person who is dying. As the minister encounters a

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Anderson, "Gabriel Marcel on Personal Immortality," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 3, p. 401.

<sup>30</sup> See Hernandez, *Ethics*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *HV*, p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Marcel writes that "...hope and the calculating faculty of reason are essentially distinct and everything will be lost if we try to combine them" (*HV*, p. 59).

person approaching the end of life, she is not entering into a problematic situation that calls for the right ministerial technique or the correct words to say. Indeed, the problematic realm is the purview of the doctors and nursing staff. Rather, the minister works in the sacred realm of mystery. Her role is not that of specialist but of fellow pilgrim. Chaplain Hilary Fife speaks to this when she describes how her patient "...invited me to walk with her, not to change the route. I am there to listen and share, not preach and instruct. I believe that how I am, what she perceives me to be, is as important as what I say."<sup>33</sup> It is crucial for the minister to be at peace within her own heart regarding the mysterious nature of death and dying.<sup>34</sup> This peace is borne from accepting the fact that one's ministry is not a matter of *giving* to the patient but simply of *being* and listening. The temptation to offer the "ready-made" answer to the patient's pain is to be avoided at all costs, for such pious clichés place the entire situation back in the problematic sphere.<sup>35</sup> As we shall show, true healing and authentic ministry occur when the embrace of mystery is facilitated and encouraged.

As Marcel notes well in many of his philosophical writings, the situation of the broken world provides a constant temptation to despair.<sup>36</sup> If this is true for a person who is progressing through her life in the world, it can be all the more true and troubling to one on her death bed. As one lives in the world and faces despair, she can battle this temptation or distract herself from it in numerous ways. When death draws near however, techniques of distraction or planning to "do better" for oneself or for the world are futile. Time is running out. One might argue that the imminent approach of death calls one to face existence and the temptation to despair as never before. Questions of ultimate meaning, immortality, past hurts or regrets, are often on the mind of the terminally ill. Fife comments on this ministerial reality when she notes that "it is one of the paradoxes of living and dying that we can find that we expended quantities of time and energy on many questions and challenges during life's journey only to realize that some of the most complex issues have been left until the end, when time to wrestle with them is very limited and hampered by weakness and pain."<sup>37</sup> So as a minister enters the room of one who is dying, how must she respond to the patient who may be asking the deeper questions of meaning or even battling against the hopelessness which is despair? And how must her response be shaped by what we have noted about death being a mystery and not a problem?

Concerning ministry to one who is dying, it appears the Marcel would once again affirm a double affirmation as far as counseling practices. Both the pious platitude and apophatic silence are out of place. Rather, an attentive listening and cautious responding are necessary to demonstrate to the patient and in a certain manner to ourselves, that we are entering into the

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<sup>33</sup> Alison Duffley, Hilary Fife, and Melanie Lockett, "Palliative Care, pastoral care and counseling: working together, learning from one another," (hereinafter, *PPC*) in Laura Barnett (ed.), *When Death Enters the Therapeutic Space: Existential Perspectives in Psychotherapy and Counseling* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 153; hereinafter, Barnett, *Perspectives*.

<sup>34</sup> Melanie Lockett speaks to the importance of the minister being at peace with issues of death and dying when she notes, "Providing the right kind of help is not easy. Counsellors who protect themselves against their own existential anxieties, blocked by fear, may notice that they adopt a protective role. They want to rescue their clients from their distress [thus viewing them as a Marcelian problem to be solved]...By being protective we can unwittingly erode an individual's sense of self or resourcefulness" (Lockett, *PPC*, p. 53).

<sup>35</sup> I have in mind here such comments as, "God is waiting for you," or "God only gives his greatest tests to the ones he loves the most," etc.

<sup>36</sup> See *PI*, p. 229.

<sup>37</sup> Fife, *PPC*, p. 152.

mystery with the person. Each person's quest for meaning and/or battle with despair is unique.<sup>38</sup> The role of companionship as one faces the mystery of death and dying is not to be underestimated. One case study notes the insightful remark of a young woman who describes the experience of dying as "It feels like I'm going on a journey and no one is coming with me."<sup>39</sup> The Marcelian themes of presence and communion are applicable here in that they provide insight into journeying with the dying. The presence of the minister and the communion it offers are not complicated or problematic matters. Rather they simply consist in being completely available to the patient as she speaks about the experience of dying and all of the questions and fears that surround it.<sup>40</sup> Dialogue is central in that, "When we begin to speak or articulate our despair to some other person, then a dialogue is started that may lead to greater understanding of the phenomenon."<sup>41</sup> Because the minister is not a medical professional or an overly emotional family member, she can provide a safe space for the patient to share and be open. Frank conversations can be had as there is no fear of upsetting a loved-one or burdening an overworked staff member. This open sharing can then—in time—lead to the dying person enjoying a certain level of communion with the minister.<sup>42</sup> This communion, born from compassionate and nonjudgmental presence, can engender a sense of hope in the patient. Marcel's philosophy teaches us that all that we have just noted is not necessarily guaranteed, but depends on the free action of both patient and minister in making the "relational turn." It is precisely in the mutual openness between minister and patient that hope can emerge as the natural fruit of authentic presence and communion. This hope is not the optimistic desire for some miraculous cure<sup>43</sup> but rather the openness to believing that death does not have the final say and that there is an inexhaustible realm of being which transcends death and the problematic world. In short, that love is stronger than death. Marcel comments on this when he writes, "I have always come to the same conclusion: the only answer consists in persuading the despairing person that the abyss-situation before which he is placed is not final and that there is a dimension of the real in which the nature of the situation is changed..."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> John Heaton speaks to the futility of technique when despair is in play, "We cannot show a person how to step out of despair, because he does not recognize it as such, he does not understand what it is, because it is the way he exists...What is needed is to operate descriptively rather than prescriptively. In other words, we need genuine phenomenological insight into the matter, rather than inventions or interpretations based on a constructivist theory and this includes, of course, a theory of despair," John Heaton, "Reflections on Suicide and Despair," in Barnett, *Perspectives*, p. 126; hereinafter, Heaton, *Reflections*.

<sup>39</sup> Heaton, *Reflections*, p. 138.

<sup>40</sup> Lockett describes this simple process of conversing with a patient as, "I can express my compassion and be a witness to her struggle, helping her to make sense of her life at this time. I can connect with her in a very ordinary way so that she might feel less isolated and calmer in the knowledge that we all die and it is normal," Lockett, *PPC*, p. 155.

<sup>41</sup> Heaton, *Reflections*, p. 126. In Donald N. Peel's article "How to be a Friend to the Dying and the Mourner," he makes a similar point in advising that the patient's "Reviewing their life out loud with a friend is a great help to them in affirming their human value to society, to you, and by a kind of mystic extrapolation to God," found in Ian Gentles (ed.), *Care for the Dying and Bereaved* (Toronto: Anglican Books, 1982), p. 501; hereinafter, Gentles, *Care*.

<sup>42</sup> "The crucial point is that they have a witness, another person, to listen and respond to their misery," Heaton, *Reflections*, p. 129.

<sup>43</sup> See Marcel's contrast between hope and optimism in *HV*, pp. 23ff.

<sup>44</sup> James McLachan, "The Mystery of Evil and Freedom: Gabriel Marcel's Reading of Schelling's *Of Human Freedom*," *Philosophy and Theology*, (Fall-Winter) 2000, Vol. 12, p. 392.

In conversing with the patient, the minister can assist her to explore the transcendent realm by being attentive to the experiences of loving presence that she has had in life. It may indeed be the case that reflecting upon past experiences of love provides an opening to speaking about the enduring presence of those that the patient has loved but who are now deceased. Such a conversation is not a morbid exercise but rather a reflection on the fact that love—rooted in presence and communion with another person—seems to exist beyond the limits of the physical world. Indeed, many patients may have the experience of being connected to a much larger community of persons united in love and existing on both sides of eternity. Thus death may be understood as a transition in which communion between beings is fulfilled rather than destroyed. Ministerial conversations with the patient may or may not lead to these profound conclusions. For the minister, the destination is not the point. Rather, it is the minister's ability to be present, to listen, in a word to love the patient, that are most important. This facilitated reflection upon the experience of love need not only focus on the positive aspects of one's love experiences. Even negative memories concerning love—whether cases in which one did not love enough or was denied love by another—can be fodder for the minister to invite the patient to consider the hopeful reality of a transcendent dimension. This can be done by gently suggesting that one's deep need to love and be loved are essential to what it means to be a person. And this personal thirst for love is so great that it can only be filled by an eternal love source which some traditions name God. As we noted earlier, love carries within it the seeds of immortality. It stands to reason then that facilitating a person's reflection on experiences of love and the truth that one's deep existential need for love cannot be filled in this world has the potential to engender hope for immortality.

Much of what we have already noted concerning ministry to the dying can also be applied to the bereaved. As Marcel noted, it is the death of the beloved—more so than death in general or even my own death—that strikes to the inner depths of the person and has the potential to create a crisis of meaning. Just as the dying might be tempted to despair so also the bereaved who question the purpose of living in a world without their beloved. To be clear, each instance of grief is personal and unique, indeed a Marcelian mystery. Any attempts to employ fixed techniques or strategies are out of place in that the grieving individual is not facing an external problem but an internal threat to hope and meaning. As in ministry to the dying, work with the bereaved is a *via media* between saying too much and saying too little. As always the pious response is to be avoided and attentive listening and responding are preferred.<sup>45</sup> After losing a loved one, the bereaved may be in the grips of an endless cycle of questioning: Why did my loved one die? Could I have done anything more to help them? Am I to blame? How can I go on?<sup>46</sup> When faced with such questions, the bereaved is tempted to see the death of their beloved as a problem and to ask how or why the “malfunction,” namely death, has taken place. It is clear that viewing the death of a loved one as a problem to be interrogated will only end in frustration and despair. Mortality and loss are mysteries for which no ultimate solution can be found. In theological terms one might say that the mystery of mortality is rooted in the mystery of sin.

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<sup>45</sup> Commenting on methods of responding to those struggling with despair Heaton writes, “We [counselors] remind them of things they have forgotten, and of the obvious, we make up pertinent stories, point out paradoxes, in order to loosen their fixation on dogmatic forms of life” (Heaton, *Reflections*, p. 130). It seems that the methods described by Heaton are counseling techniques that aim at freeing one from the grip of the problematic and into the realm of mystery.

<sup>46</sup> See Mary L. Vachon, “Grief and Bereavement: The Family's Experience Before and After Death,” in Gentles, *Care*, pp. 62-77 (hereinafter Vachon, *Grief*).

As the minister begins to speak and relate with the bereaved person, the Marcelian themes of presence and communion come into play. When a loved one is lost to death, those left behind can experience feelings of guilt and isolation, which tempt despair.<sup>47</sup> It is important for the minister to be gentle and patient so as to allow the bereaved a “sacred space” in which to name and describe their feelings.<sup>48</sup> As the minister makes herself present and available, a bond of communion can begin to form. This bond, akin to what therapists may call the “working alliance,” is essential in that it represents the first move in the relational turn. As the bereaved is in the midst of isolating and confusing grief, the minister can be the first signpost toward hope<sup>49</sup> and a renewed sense of life’s meaning. Such is accomplished through the simple tasks of attentive listening, careful responding, and loving presence. It is important to note that I am not here suggesting that the minister is the sole savior or refuge for the bereaved nor that all bereavement necessarily involves severe bouts of isolation and despair. Rather, I am pointing to the positive role a minister, who is not a health professional or family member, can have in assisting a person to move through grief in a healthy way that advances toward wholeness.

An aspect of the conversation between minister and bereaved can be the ongoing relationship one has with the deceased. Conversations can begin by remembering what it was like to love and be loved by the one who has now died. Reflections on that experience can be healing and life giving for the mourner in that they can foster a sense of gratitude. Even negative memories can be part of this dialogue in that forgiving and asking forgiveness of our deceased loved ones is often at issue. It cannot be stated too strongly that what I have just described must be embarked upon by the minister with extreme caution, discernment, and for more difficult cases in consultation with a mental health professional. Certain persons may have had a traumatic or complicated relationship with the loved one who has died and such sharing of memories would not be beneficial or at least not soon after the experience of loss. As in all helping professions, the minister must recognize her field of competence. If it is deemed helpful to recall the experience of loving and being loved by the deceased, the minister might invite the bereaved to reflect upon whether or not the deceased loved one is still present to them. Many people report dreaming about their lost loved one or receiving certain “signs” that indicate to them that their loved one is alright and is watching over them. Such reflections can be most consoling and would serve as indications of enduring presence and communion. The bereaved should be encouraged to be faithful to their sense that their loved one is still present to them, albeit in a new manner. This fidelity to presence along with the gratitude born from reflecting on the joy of having loved and been loved by the deceased can engender hope in the mourner. This hope is rooted in the fact that their beloved was a gift to them and their experience of this gift is so rich that it convinces them that the gift is eternal and goes on. Ministers can share in this

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<sup>47</sup> Vachon comments on the struggle bereaved persons often have in finding meaning in life without their loved one, “The search to establish a reason for living when all meaning has gone out of life can be extremely difficult. It may cause one to question seriously one’s reason for living, one’s relationship with God and other people. It may raise the possibility of suicide as a way out, or radically altering one’s life to pretend the deceased never lived, of using the time left to profit from what one has learned, or just ‘hanging in there’ until death comes along” (Vachon, *Grief*, p. 73).

<sup>48</sup> “The best form of intervention with the bereaved is that supplied by family and friends who will let them talk about the deceased; accept their feelings of depression, loss, anger, resentment...” (*Ibid*, p. 73).

<sup>49</sup> “Hoping...is a constituent structure of a human, it is fundamentally a centrifugal movement emanating from the deepest interior of the person, an other-directed, other-regarding, self-transcendent act of giving and receiving love,” Paul Marcus, *In Search of the Spiritual: Gabriel Marcel, Psychoanalysis, and the Sacred* (London: Karnac, 2013), p. 65.

process by helping the bereaved to make the relational turn, reflect upon the loving presence of their beloved (both past and present), and dare to embrace hope in a changeless realm of being.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to apply the philosophical scheme of Gabriel Marcel to the issue of pastoral care of the dying and the bereaved. To accomplish this, I first treated the important distinction made by Marcel between a problem and a mystery. Following this I examined how this distinction operates in discussion of evil which is best understood as a mystery and not as a problem. Death, as a common and concrete experience of evil, is likewise to be treated as a mystery. With this philosophical framework laid, I then turned to the role of the minister in caring for the dying and bereaved. I argued that the overall task of the minister is to allow the dying and bereaved to embrace the realm of mystery from which hope can be glimpsed. Through being present and in communion with the dying and the bereaved, the minister can create space for reflection upon the reality of love, both past and present. Such reflection has the possibility of engendering a sense of hope in those whom the minister serves in so far as they glimpse that their experiences of love have no expiration date and may serve as indicators to a realm where love is eternal and death defeated. The minister must be a person comfortable with mystery.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> A much shorter version of this paper was given at the Notre Dame *Ethics and Culture Conference*, November, 2017.