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Telling the Story Once Again

By Sister Robin Stratton

It is only with time, patience, and attentiveness that the meaning of the events of life really unfold. There is more meaning to life than can be grasped at any one time. Perhaps the full meaning will only be revealed to us after the journey is over and we have managed to survive life with all its vicissitudes. I would like to explore the first ten chapters of Teresa's *Life* in the light of this belief. When Teresa wrote her life, she was fifty years old. She had founded San Jose, her first little "dovecot," three years before and had lived eight very full years since her definitive mid-life crisis-conversion at the age of forty-two. She is looking back and remembering what those fifty years have been.

Teresa had lived with the varied sides of herself. She had achieved self-knowledge through experience. She had brought this rich, full human person to the service of the Lord. She is looking back over years of praying and not praying, of growing, regressing, developing and coming to maturity. She has explored her capacities and strengths as well as liabilities and weaknesses. She is remembering her desire to please others, to be liked, to succeed. She knows her capacity for deep and lasting friendship as well as the insatiable desire for the eternal in the midst of time. She recognizes that her warm, loving heart has led her astray more than once. And she knows well the anguish of being unable to surrender to the Lord the whole of herself for many a year. Her rich exuberant personality had needed time and honing to come into its fulness.

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This was a woman who was not to be a half saint, a pious woman, but a human being fully alive to God, to others, and to herself. This experience of herself is what she shares with her "sisters and daughters" – a rich legacy of the importance of self-knowledge in the life of prayer. For Teresa, a deep contemplative knowledge of herself gave her insight into the world of others. It provided the ground where seeds of compassion and understanding, humor and balance could flourish in her dealings with persons both within and outside the monastery. Teresa was molded by the very experiences that she later speaks of regretting. Yet, without these all too human experiences, we would not have the Teresa who is no stranger to our humanity – the woman who leaves us no excuse for mediocrity or for giving up the journey. She is truly a woman for all times and seasons who did not grow up in a hothouse of virtue where she never made unwise decisions. She lived to the full the ebb and flow of growing up – the pull of good and bad influences in her life – the rhythm of fervor and rebellion. She speaks of asserting her independence and of hiding her reading matter from her Father whose approval she sought and whose disapproval nearly killed her – as she asserts of her feelings when she entered the convent against his wishes.

Time after time in the early pages of the life, Teresa speaks of how much she was loved – a love which undoubtedly provided security for the child who would dare to run away to have her head chopped off by the Moors so she could live happily with God "for ever and ever and ever." She seems, at fifty, to be awed by the tremendous love she had received all during her life. It was the sure foundation that would see her through many a crisis. It was also the natural grounding for God's love at work in all the tangled threads of her years. No matter how far she wandered, she always returned to His love and mercy. As she writes of her fidelity and infidelity, memory upon memory crowds upon her consciousness – but over everything is cast the mantle of God's love and mercy. All is perceived in the light of God. She is like the Samaritan woman who ran through the town crying "Come and see someone who has told me everything I ever did." Teresa wants to tell the world about this great Lord of hers. It is as though she is saying to each of us who reads her words, "If He has done this much for me, He will surely do the same for anyone else who seeks Him." She glories in her story because she sees so clearly that it is diffused with the utter goodness of God. This exploration of her past is, for Teresa, a commitment to her future. She knows the fidelity of the Lord by experience. Now, in the generation period of life, called to give life to others, she tells the story in a way that her sisters and daughters may be drawn to hear their own story and follow the Lord.

For years I held this woman whom I call "Holy Mother" on a pedestal. I literally looked up to her with her biretta, her bird, and her

book. I was awed by her as mystic and foundress. Her writings were given to me as a young sister and I was told that she would teach me how to become a Carmelite. The distance between us became a chasm as I read – one that was utterly impassable. She was what I was supposed to be – and desired to be – but I couldn't identify with her. She was bigger than life – and all I felt I could do was follow at a discreet distance and hope she would acknowledge me as her daughter when we met in heaven! I suspect that part of my fear came from trying to internalize THE WAY OF PERFECTION before I had really heard (with my heart and understanding rather than my ears) the story of her life. It was sort of putting the cart before the horse. I heard that I was to live in freedom – but hadn't yet experienced my own unfreedom and God's mercy in my life. I had not yet reached a maturity that would allow me to own the dark as well as the light sides of myself, and in that owning grow free enough to skip along the Way as a journey to wholeness that is always in process. And I must admit that, even when I did read the LIFE, I felt that the emphasis on prayer was so important (for after all, that is why we are here, as Teresa would say so often) that I read over the first ten chapters of the LIFE quickly in order to get to the "really important part" about prayer and growth in union with God. It has taken me years to understand why she placed such importance upon self-knowledge as the foundation of the house of prayer. I couldn't really believe that she was as human, fragile, and grungy as I – that her journey had, in its own way, been as bumpy as my own. If I had been able to do so, I would have had to assume a greater responsibility for my own life and growth. I wasn't ready for that yet. So I let her carry the burden of holiness while I was content to carry the burden of guilt! When I was able some years ago to allow her to become real to me, I discovered a friend who could share my struggle for wholeness as well as my passion for life. As the daughter of an alcoholic father, I have recently been struck by the fact that Teresa's father and grandfather were of Jewish extraction. I can identify with someone who went through growing up with a strike against her!

It is impossible for us to know with certainty how much Teresa knew of her ancestry, but it seems certain that she did know the fact at least. In the Spain of her day, with its emphasis on "pure blood" and old Christian families, Teresa's life must have been influenced by the fact that she belonged to neither class. She belonged to upper class society because her grandfather, and later her father, were able to work and buy their way into it over the years. Her father lived way beyond his means in the effort to cover his tracks, and died penniless. Teresa begins her story by telling us that she had good parents – that's all. And it says a great deal at a time when being of noble birth and pure blood were of paramount importance for credibility. (In later years, she

had an almost unheard of democratic spirit in her houses. Women were to be received without respect to the background. Unfortunately, those who followed her were not so broad-minded or so free and this spirit was rescinded after her death.)

Teresa seems always to have sought someone to share her pursuits, whether the other is a brother, cousin, or friend. When she experienced the Lord calling her to solitude, to withdraw from some of the busy and frivolous friendships in which she was engaged, she was afraid. The Lord seemed to want to help Teresa to face herself, to enable her to stop leaning so much on others for support and affirmation. There comes a point in life when each person must stand alone before God and the world and take responsibility for their own life. It is a painful time, for in it I experience my uniqueness, my difference from others, my incompleteness, my aloneness. I yearn for another who can free me from this solitude and there is no one who can do so. I must somehow stand between heaven and earth, unsupported by either. The image that comes to mind is the Christ of Saint John of the Cross—the Body of Christ stretched toward earth yet raised on high. It is the call to transcend self—a self that is called to die in order that fuller life may be a lived reality.

Teresa is a very intense person. It took her years to reach a balance in her life—a balance precariously achieved through long experience of trial and error, of getting to know herself thoroughly and coming to terms with her assets and liabilities. Two incidents seem to me very telling in this regard. After a year and a half in boarding school, Teresa tells us, she has been growing in virtue and reconciles herself to the thought of becoming a nun. She also tells us that she really didn't have a desire to be a nun, but it seemed to be a good alternative. Shortly thereafter, she becomes ill and has to return home from school. Was the strain too much for her? Was she demanding of herself a wholeness of response that she wasn't yet ready to make? Perhaps her body was wiser than her head. The year after she makes her Profession of Vows at the Incarnation, the same thing happens. What are we to make of this? I can identify with her in this—trying too hard can make our whole being grind to a halt. I call it "body wisdom" and I have learned to listen when my body seems smarter than my head. Teresa said elsewhere, "We have bodies, Sisters, and to pretend that we are angels is foolishness."

Teresa fell into the trap that ensnares many of us—she settled for half-measures for years. She accepted life rather than challenge it. She experienced much growth in prayer by the time she was twenty-three and then dabbled in life for the next twenty years. Although no one could say that she brought the whole of herself to the Lord during those years, I submit that very important things were happening despite appearances. Teresa really did have to experience every facet

of herself. If these ten chapters of the LIFE tell us anything, I believe they are trying to tell us this: Teresa moves ahead, backtracks, grows, struggles, refuses to give in to God totally because the cost is too great. She comes to terms slowly with her need to make it in life on her own terms—to love God certainly—but to be popular, esteemed, and respected as well. Teresa wanted to be a comfortably good nun and God wanted her to be a full human person, wholly surrendered to Him and thus totally opened to human experience. Teresa was afraid of losing something. While all the time God was waiting to give her more than she ever imagined . . . "but not without persecution." Teresa struggled, as she had since childhood, to find a quick and easy way to achieve holiness and God waited to teach her the paramount importance of a daily life of charity, humility, and patience. She will later write that these three virtues are most important in the pursuit of union with God. These "in-between" years are vitally important for Teresa. She learned self-acceptance through the things that she suffered. Teresa tells us that she was always thought well of by others—and that she suffered much because of her sins. As she searched for balance, what sort of conflict might this have created in her? She enjoyed being popular, well-liked, respected. Was this respect from others the necessary complement of her struggle with personal sinfulness and the knowledge that she wasn't what she appeared to be? The struggle is all too human and, for many of us, it takes years to resolve—years that look fallow in the endurance. Yet I can look back on similar experiences in my own life at a vantage point of some years and a bit of wisdom and realize that there was a struggle for life taking shape—a struggle between light and dark, God and selfishness. As time passes, the apparent losses, the failures, the dark holes can perhaps be seen in the light of a wholeness we could not have perceived previously. The story is told of two people looking at a scar—one remarks: "What an awful scar"—the other says: "How well it healed." Sister Miriam Therese Winters has a song that often sings in my heart. The refrain is "There's nothing lost, it's just the cost of loving You." So too, Teresa looks back and views her life's scars now bright with the light of the Crucified One.

When Teresa, at the age of forty-two, is able to own the responsibility for her own life, she realizes that she can't surrender what God is asking of her. She can admit that she is tired of the struggle to hold onto her life so tightly. She is now ready to "hit bottom" as people in Alcoholics Anonymous put it so aptly. She is free to go before the Lord in a surrender that will result in an inflow of God, healing her brokenness, and creating a new heart that is free to serve the Lord in any way that HE wants, rather than according to her own plans. She is opened wide to do His will and live in His service. She writes, toward the end of her life: "Do you know what it means to be truly spiritual? It means

becoming the slaves of God. Marked with His brand, which is that of the Cross, spiritual persons, because now they have given Him their liberty, can be sold by Him as slaves of everyone, as He was." (Mansions VII:4-8)

Thus Teresa, who in the beginning sets out to save her own soul, ends the journey as the mother of many, despoiled of the solitude, silence, and spiritual helps she had thought essential to her journey, thrust into the marketplace of oxcart travel, rutted roads, poor lodging – and an unshakable conviction that the Martha and Mary in her are at last one in the service of the Lord.