

The World of Stuff

There used to be a funny television commercial for a gymnasium geared to ordinary people. The star of the commercial was a massively built but dimwitted body-builder. All the man could say in response to any question was *"I pick up things and I put them down. I pick up things and I put them down."* The extremely minimalist description of weightlifting and the mindless response of the bodybuilder gave the commercial a funny sense of absurdity.

Walking through a big Walmart the other day, I was struck by the massive collection of brightly colored "stuff" everywhere. Even though I had gone there to pick up some specific items, I walked through the store reflecting on how dominant "stuff" is in this life and how the day is coming when I will no longer dwell in the world of "stuff."

This was a moment when, by the sheer grace of God, I felt transported "above" or "outside" of an ordinary that day. I was reminded of a famous quote from the German theologian, Karl Rahner, from 1981: *"The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all."* What I mean is that God had granted me a 'moment' to which I was sufficiently able to attune my consciousness. It was a momentary detachment from the world of "stuff" which is, otherwise, so dominant and pervasive.

Mysticism and the life of deep contemplation seem to be the realm of a few, extraordinary saints like Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich, to name a few. They are "professionals." They are people who have dedicated their lives to extreme discipline, denial and the devotion of all their time to prayer and reflection. But, writers such as Rahner, and some others, suggest that we should not rule out some mystical experiences in our own lives as ordinary, busy, active people.

My own spiritual practice is woefully wanting. The temptation to be "doing," "achieving" and "functioning" can be overwhelming. Prayer and contemplation feel like---well---doing nothing or getting nothing accomplished. Perhaps, however, my Walmart moment, discloses that I had just enough openness to have a "transcendent" moment, and there could be more if I would just surrender the other impulses to "the better portion," (as Jesus says regarding Martha's sister, Mary of Bethany).

But what did it mean? What is the special insight or message walking through the aisles of the Walmart? It isn't so much a message but a "seeing through the appearances." It was almost as if I were seeing the shelves of stuff disintegrating or evaporating and uncovering some other dimension of reality which, honestly, I can't describe. I honestly did not get a good look at it or see anything at all. All of the "stuff" was still in front of me, and I still had things to purchase and stuff to do. But, it was definitely an interruption of the ordinary.

"A house is just a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff."

- George Carlin



sellallyourstuff.com

I found the following definition of mysticism on a Catholic website: *When a person has a deep experience of the reality of God in prayer that is beyond words, one touches upon the reality of the mystery of God. One forgets the self praying and is enveloped in the presence of God. That self-forgetting awareness of the presence of God is what we would today call a mystical experience.*

I can't say that I was in prayer or particularly reflective in the moment I described. But this lends to the experience all the more quality of "gratuitousness" or "gift." The message I received is that this life is not just about ordering and re-ordering "stuff." The time will come when I will not have the arms to move stuff or reshape it or work with it or throw it in the dumpster. And, anyhow, stuff will become irrelevant in the presence of the one who is the source of all good.

But, I must say, the nano-second prior to this "moment," as I scanned all of the stuff on the shelves at Walmart --- all of the shiny, fuzzy, glitzy, colorful stuff---I had a combined thought/feeling which I would express in a phrase, *"This stuff! It all just leaves me empty."*