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A TESTAMENT OF DEVOTION: AN APPRECIATION

ELAINE M. PREVALLET, S.L.

NOT LONG AGO, I GAVE A young woman a copy of *A Testament of Devotion* to read. When she returned the book, some weeks later, her comment was, “Where can I find more of this?” I had to think awhile before I could respond; her question made me wonder what it is about this piece of writing that makes it so unusual.

In these remarks I want first to address two qualities which I believe make this particular piece of writing unusual. Then I will reflect at greater length on aspects of Thomas Kelly’s work for which I feel particularly grateful, and try to focus them specifically on the theme of community.

The first word that comes to mind when I think about *A Testament* is authenticity, and I was delighted, when I reread Douglas Steere’s introduction to *A Testament* that that was the word he too hit upon. When I say authenticity, I mean that it bears the seal of the man’s own truth. Thomas Kelly speaks of what he has known in his own experience, and speaks without leaving the place of inner truth. Here is no theological speculation, but the heart of a person who has known the reality of God’s life within him, and works to find the words to share it. Not all of us have experience to match that of Thomas Kelly, let alone the gifts of mind and expression that enable him to write of it. But each of us does have the capacity for authenticity, for trying to put words on what we know and, perhaps as importantly, for some inner monitoring of our tendency to say more than we know. On an occasion such as this one, that kind of monitoring becomes unusually important for me: I do not want in these remarks to say more than I know—and that does surely limit me.

The second word that comes to mind is integration. Douglas Steere wrote in the Introduction, “A new life direction took place in Thomas Kelly. No one knows exactly what happened, but a strained period in his life was over....A fissure in him seemed to close, cliffs caved in and filled up a chasm, and what was divided grew together in him.”¹ I wonder whether the integration evidenced in *Testament* is in part the integration that we now speak rather familiarly of as mid-life crisis;

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Kelly was, after all, in his mid-forties. With his failure at Harvard, his former driving motivation had painfully collapsed; he was guided into the channel where his deepest inner resources could be activated, however briefly. His life was truly re-formed. There's a lesson there about the radicalness of the re-formation or re-orientation God has to work in us if we are truly to be instruments of peace. We can't do it; we have to be turned around, in ways we least imagine. But we can offer to the process a kind of radical willingness to allow it.

The kind of speaking or writing that Kelly produces in Testament evidences a rare integration of gifts. His theology is integrated with his experience; he writes not just with his head, but with emotionality and passionate conviction; he uses heart as amply as he uses mind. Such integration usually requires a certain depth, as well as length of life, and it issues in a kind of universality of spirit. Writing then seems to be able to touch many persons, because it comes from personal wholeness. That it was an experience of God that brought it all together for Thomas Kelly seems evident. The relationship of the psychological and the religious dimensions of life exemplified here could make an interesting study.

I want now to focus on Thomas Kelly's gift for integration, and relate it to an area of his work for which I feel particularly grateful: his appreciation of "inwardness," and his capacity to align the inner and outer dimensions of our lives, individual and society, self and world. Kelly writes that the inner drama taking place within the human heart is the real source of changes in the "outer pageant of history." (TD 51) We can be deceived into thinking "that there [in the outer world] is where the real business of [hu]mankind is done." But in truth, "the deep level of prayer and divine attendance is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined.... Between the two levels is fruitful interplay...." (TD 35-6) And that is the next area that I want to address, in appreciation: the "fruitful interplay" between what Kelly alternately names the outer, or upper or surface level, and the deeper or inner level of our reality. I will try to reflect upon that interplay as it applies to the theme of individual and community.

We know, of course, that society and the individual cannot really be separated; we know that as society changes outwardly, our minds are changed, and reciprocally as our minds change, "the world" changes. We know that we are at present involved in a mind-and-world change of some magnitude and mystery. Brian Swimme speaks of the universe

as “a mutually evocative reality.”²² We know that there is a reciprocal relationship, but we don’t really know how inner and outer are connected and subtly influence each other. Our images are changing, from that of solid substances to that of continual energy exchange. Still, we experience inner and outer as separate, with our awareness as some kind of a bridge between. Kelly’s language, dividing upper or surface from deeper or inner may not be exactly accurate, but if we can keep in mind the actual inseparableness of the two, their continual interaction and reciprocity, that language can help us to name different moments of our experience.

I want to quote *A Testament of Devotion* here, because I think Kelly says these things more eloquently and accurately than I could say them. God “in our truest moments...disquiets us with the world’s needs. By inner persuasions He draws us to a few very definite tasks, our tasks, God’s burdened heart particularizing His burdens in us.”(TD 72)

Kelly speaks of “the special responsibility experienced in a concern A...concern particularizes this cosmic tenderness. It brings to a definite and effective focus in some concrete task all that experience of love and responsibility which might evaporate, in its broad generality, into yearnings for a golden Paradise.”(TD108) Not the general, not sentiment or emotion, but the particular, the do-able.

“The loving Presence does not burden us equally with all things, but considerately puts upon each of us just a few central tasks, as emphatic responsibilities.” On the universal level, we feel kindly toward many causes or issues; “but we are dismissed from active service in most of them. We cannot die on every cross, nor are we expected to.”(TD 109) God “working within us, portions out His vast concerns into bundles, and lays on each of us our portion. These become our tasks.”(TD 123)

Kelly’s sense, expressed in these passages, seems to be that God’s care for the world is universal—God’s “cosmic tenderness” as he calls it—but at the same time completely specific. It is a completely inward impulse that encompasses the world and at the same time as it draws us inward, it compels and directs us outward. Each of us has the responsibility to pay attention to what we experience, in the outer world (what we see and hear) and in the inner world (in prayer or meditation). If we are doing that, each of us will be given a very specific role to play, a role that is consonant with our sometimes as yet undiscovered capacities, and a role that is essential to the working out of the benefit and

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harmony of the universe. How readily this view squares with what we are learning from physics: Everything is connected to everything else. But with this addition: In God's mysterious working, there is an intentionality or purposiveness that is communicated to us, within us.

Each of us is in some way "for" the others, in a quite specific way, and genuine power lies in making the connection. Our own well-being, as well as that of the whole, depends upon our ability and our willingness to give expression to that purpose. This is actually a re-statement of Paul's image of the body of Christ, each member endowed with a gift that serves the whole Body. Contemporary thought would probably broaden Paul's concept to include the whole earth, Gaia, and transmute the image into each of us as cells or organisms with a role to play that makes a specific contribution to the whole. I guess that's a kind of faith; minimally, it means we have an image of the universe that involves some connection and purpose—and these are not to be taken for granted. In these days of rampant individualism and lack of clear focus on a common good, we need to know these connections. Kelly's writing directs us inward, reaches for our spiritual depths and speaks intimately to that level of our being. Yet he never leaves behind the community, the meeting, the larger society and world in which the individual is located.

This discerning, or being aware of the particular gift or role each of us has is no small matter. In so outward-oriented a culture as ours, to discover one's own place, and stand there, can be extremely difficult. For while we seem to cultivate and coddle the individual, at the same time we are at constant risk of being victimized by the collective—by advertising, by media—to adapt ourselves to values and images that have no real authenticity for us.

Our culture makes inwardness so difficult. Everything is geared to the outer world, and with increasing impersonalness. Interacting with computers is a more valuable and lucrative skill than interacting with people. And even though the broadly-defined "New Age Movement" does prize meditation, body work, psychological insight—all of which can help us explore our own inner life—it is in general a very individual (not to say yuppie) pursuit. It focuses on the "me," what works for me, what helps me, what makes me feel centered. Toward the end of his book, *The Undiscovered Self* Carl Jung asked the question, "Does the individual know that he [or she] is the makeweight that tips the scales?"³ While it is true that the individual is the "make-weight" that

could shift the balance of society; while it is true that without individual work society cannot change, still our culture seems to be missing some essential component.

Maybe because the world is changing so fast, we no longer have any clear sense of what is meant by a “common” good as a matrix for individual self-awareness. Our focus on the individual in this culture does not ordinarily seem to be located within a common good, nor is it geared toward helping us find the gift that will strengthen the society. We seem to be edging toward a (still somewhat confused) sense of a global community, but nationally we have not discovered how to mesh that with national or local concerns. A sense of global community is a gain, but it can be perilous if we lose our sense of community with those close by. Jesus’ command to love our neighbor is always easier to practice when the neighbor is at a distance and cannot make demands. In short, modern consciousness is missing a community to be a matrix for the individual. (The use of the feminine word matrix here may be telling us something about the loss of the feminine, but that is another subject.) With our culture’s emphasis on the individual, there is no accompanying sense of common responsibility, common worship, no awareness of the inner gathering of Spirit that quickens not just the individual but a whole community.

One of the factors in this situation is no doubt the pluralism that characterizes our culture. Other possibilities—other ways of living, thinking, acting, judging—are always present in our consciousness. Pluralism is part of our cognitive structure. Certainty becomes impossible, and commitment incalculably more difficult. Unless we live inwardly to at least some extent, we risk getting lost in one of two directions. One is the direction of right wing, religious fundamentalism, where we choose to turn our judgment over to a group or leader who makes our decisions and does our thinking for us. This gives a way out of the confusion. A second alternative is to be paralyzed by alternatives. Then instead of choosing, because choosing becomes so difficult, we just let society define us. When we let society define us, we lose the sense of our own unique gift—the uniqueness of God’s call to each of us. There will always be, deep within every human, the quiet pull of the transcending “more” tugging at our hearts. “The world has in itself a seeking, a longing, a desire, a cosmic hunger... This cosmic longing is love—the cosmic appetite for perfection.”⁴ Our hearts are restless; we can’t escape the desire for “more,” but we can confuse it with the outer world—more money, more mobility, more experience,

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more options and especially, more control. We can misinterpret, or become insensitive to “the drawing of that Love and the voice of that Calling,”⁵ in T.S. Eliot’s phrase.

Of course, we get hooked because we need affirmation from the collective; we get hooked into needing to look and feel valuable in society’s eyes. Those of us who desire to be faithful are aware that we live in a world whose pain is inescapable; we live in a world of causes and needs and issues and bandwagons—enough to confuse us, to leave us spinning our wheels in inaction. Here too, the plurality of options can paralyze us.

And yet our capacity to “feel bad” when we see the news of war and violence, when we see or hear about the latest ecological breakdown or destruction, serves as an index of our communion with creation. If we were not connected in some way, we could not feel any response. But the enormity of the perception can paralyze us. Without deep innerness and attentiveness to inner leading, the multiplicity or plurality of the world leaves us inert in our confusion. And here Thomas Kelly’s insight, that “God shapes the bundle to our capacity,” that “we cannot die on every cross, nor are we expected to,” comes as very welcome wisdom. Often, probably most often, our own role will seem miniscule, given the enormity of the needs. It will seem so small that it cannot possibly matter. And it may well be quite hidden, visible to only a few, and affirmed by only a few—if we’re lucky. To be faithful then requires a deep sense of grounding, a continual standing in the Light. An essential part of the process of inward-turning is for us, as it was for Thomas Kelly, the re-orientation of our motivation, letting the Light expose to us the shadow of our own conceit and arrogance, our own desire for power. To be willing, and to be able to do small things with the sense that this is what is given to me to do, and to let go of the demand that my contribution be recognized or especially the demand that it be successful: That is a great blessing. But it is a blessing that comes to us only after we have experienced the necessity of true humility: humility that has purified us of our instinctive grandiosity, and that can value and appreciate the unique importance of the small contribution each of us is able to make.

Thomas Kelly’s images are so helpful. “Fugitive islands of secret reservations elude us,” he writes (TD 50)—a marvelous image. We think we are willing, but when we feel ourselves overlooked or unappreciated, we become sullen, angry, impatient, uncooperative—and there we discover one of our fugitive islands of secret reservations. I

am willing, provided that I am recognized, appreciated, successful. Not as if we were deliberately hiding the motive or reservation—truly, we had no idea it existed! In the uncannily tailored process of God’s work in our life, precisely when we feel ourselves most set to do good, the island rises up from the sea. Our mixed motive becomes blatantly visible to us, and perhaps even embarrassingly visible to others. Then we can humbly admit that we were not quite as pure of heart as we would have hoped, and we have to let go of our desire to do it right, to be exemplary, to be a model--the part in us that, in spite of our virtue, keeps popping up to say “Look at me doing or being good!” The purification of our motivation our spiritual life process; that is the continuous work of the Holy Spirit within us. Thomas Kelly wrote of his experience in Germany: “The work here this summer, or, in the midst of the work here this summer has come an increased sense of being laid hold on by a Power, a gentle, loving, but awful Power. And it makes one know the reality of God at work in the world.”(RK 102) Here is exemplified the difference between being led, and operating out of our own drivenness, our compulsions.

You will note that I haven’t used the word mysticism, though that seems to me clearly essential in Thomas Kelly’s understanding of the spiritual life in the tradition of Friends, and indeed the promise of the Christian life. I haven’t used it because we can’t try to become mystics, and if we do we risk falsifying the whole process. What we can do is allow the continued unselfing, the continual exposing of our defenses, our postures, our pretences. To be faithful to that task makes us true, and that is our bottom-line responsibility.

“Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves,” writes Kelly (TD 114); and the committee chairperson can’t take time for consensus, but merely counts votes, leaving disgruntled minorities (TD 115). We all know these inner conversations, arguments we have as we try to choose among alternatives. Even more deeply, we know the many images of ourselves that fight for ascendancy: to be a spiritual person, recognized as deeply prayerful; to be on the cutting edge of prophetic insight, recognized as a voice to be heeded; to be always available to meet the needs of others, recognized as a generous person to whom others can always turn and find refuge or solace. Each of these is surely an image presented as valuable within our community, within our Christian tradition, and we would like to

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be identified with one (or maybe with all) of them. Yet our self-images are simply ways we like to fancy ourselves, imagining ourselves, viewing ourselves with pleasure and pride on our inner screen.

All of this leads me to what is for me probably the most precious insight of Thomas Kelly: the awareness of the Blessed Community. “The sharing of physical goods in the primitive church is only an outcropping of a profoundly deeper sharing of a Life, the base and center of which is obscured, to those who are still oriented about self, rather than about God.” (TD 80) I think of that Beloved Community (that’s the name I give it) in two different ways, and I believe both are faithful to Thomas Kelly’s thought. The first I can best illustrate by example. Some years ago, during a summer when I was at our Motherhouse, I worked in the kitchen very early in the morning. When I got up to go over to the kitchen, I would inevitably pass a certain elderly sister, whom I knew only by name, on my way. Ordinarily we simply nodded to each other, once in a while we whispered “Good morning.” I came to anticipate that meeting, and in some strange way always felt like the Holy Spirit was greeting herself in the two of us as we passed; it felt like a holy exchange. When later I came to know that sister, I discovered that her perception had been exactly the same, and we felt deeply bonded in the Spirit up to the time she died. That inner sense of bonding, which may or may not ever have the opportunity to be ratified in a more external way; that bonding which one can sense with persons of different traditions or ways or walks of life: Thomas Kelly gave me the word, Blessed Community, which helped me to validate and to reverence that sense of bonding as a work of the Holy Spirit.

The Blessed Community has a second meaning for me. We are aware—partially because of its lack—of the necessity of community as a matrix within which each of us can discover and be nurtured in the capacity to live deeply enough into the Life Within that we can hear the specific call, (“receive the specific bundle”) which is our essential and irreplaceable contribution to be made to the whole. Particularly in this culture where, as I mentioned, we always risk being overwhelmed and paralyzed by the myriad of options, we need the help of others to discriminate what is ours to do. We need a context in which we are held accountable, and in which it is clear that, because others are doing their role with fidelity, I need not covet their gift but can work quietly at being faithful to my own small task. I can experience the relief of knowing that I don’t have to carry the burden of the whole world. This interdependence is our truth; it is nothing more—but also

nothing less—than to be our real selves, for our deepest identity is simply the specification of Love in a particular embodiment and a particular context. We cannot uncover or discover that identity by ourselves; the pressure of society pulls too hard in other directions. Kelly is clear: “Psychological and humanistic views of the essential sociality and gregariousness of man. . . [from which] spring church programs of mere sociability and social contacts” are not fellowship (TD 80). The Blessed Community means living deeply enough into the Life that we can touch and recognize it in others. My own community of sisters is, for me, a Beloved Community. I am often disappointed in us, and can feel critical and unappreciative, perhaps it’s too close and difficult to get perspective, and because we are so far from perfect. Nevertheless, my community of sisters is for me such a matrix, a Beloved Community in which I have been encouraged to live deep into the Life, and to know and trust my own gift.

And I always think of the Society of Friends as a Beloved Community, and feel grateful for the witness you give. I believe that Friends, with your grounding in respect for “that of God in each one,” with your tradition of waiting in worshipful silence for the Spirit, and processes of sharing concerns, and with the egalitarian structures in which you operate—I believe you have an enormous gift for us in these times. “Our fellowship groups are small, but they can be glorious colonies of heaven, cities set on a hill. It is a great message which is given to us—good news indeed—that the light overcomes the darkness. But to give the message we must also be the message!” (RK 125) I pray that both my community and your community of Friends, and all of us here may be faithful to that Life, and that at the deepest level we together are becoming the Beloved Community through which God is working to bring the world to its divine fulfillment.

NOTES

1. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1941), p. 18. Subsequent references will be cited in the text with TD and the page number.
2. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1992), p. 39.
3. C. G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 120.
4. Richard M. Kelly, *Thomas Kelly: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 72. Subsequent references will be cited in the text with RK and the page number.
5. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding” (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.59.