

# The Light of a Deep Conversation

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, March 13, 2011: The Third Sunday in Lent.  
Based on John 4:5-42.*

**I**t started as a simple act of schoolboy roughhousing. A boy, Jacques, just eight years old at the time, was fooling around with his friends at school recess. One of them accidentally knocked him over, slamming the back of his head into the sharp corner of the teacher's desk. The force of the blow left him blind.

But instead of living life in literal and total darkness, the boy found something else:

"Being blind was not at all as I imagined it," he wrote later. "Nor was it as the people around me seemed to think. They told me that to be blind meant not to see. Yet how was I to believe them when I *saw*?"

Of course, Jacques' way of seeing didn't happen immediately. At first he instinctively moved his eyes around and tried to outwardly follow the actions and sounds around him. But then an instinct made him change.

"I began to look from an inner place to one further within, whereupon the universe redefined itself and peopled itself anew. I was aware of radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about, a place which might as well have been outside me as within."

In that place, he said, he found "radiance, or more precisely light."

Remarkably he found that the light rose, and spread, and rested on objects, giving them form. Then, he said, the light diminished but "the opposite of light was never present."

"Without my eyes," Jacques wrote, light was much more stable than it had been with them.

This is a powerful personal testimony, in non-technical language, of the startling discoveries of Albert Einstein and Max Planck, who 100 years ago, turned upside down, or maybe inside out, the whole science of physics—the interplay between time, matter and energy or light.

Because of their theoretical breakthroughs, others experimented and found that in a real way, light produces the physical universe. I find these truths to be a staggering as I do religious truths. Quantum mechanics affirms that every interaction in the universe is an exchange of quanta of energy, or light.

Important disclaimer: I'm not saying science proves God, or that it affirms moral principles. It is what it is.

But the story of Jacques Lusseyran affirms that there's a nexus between our physical circumstances and our inner life.

Lusseyran's story doesn't stop there.<sup>1</sup>

As a teenager in Nazi-occupied France he learned German to understand better the occupiers' plans and state of mind, and at 19 he founded a cell in the French resistance, mainly made up of teenagers who fearlessly worked underground against the Nazis. His particular gift made him a valued leader.

"My sighted companions were nimble in bodily movements over which I hesitated. But as soon as it was a question of intangibles, it was their turn to hesitate." Lusseyran took a quantum leap in intuitive judgment. He could size up people's character and see through their dissembling, and he became the nearly infallible director of recruiting.

Lusseyran had an inner light that allowed him to see in the same way physical particles of light see even though they obviously have no optic nerves.

The New Testament suggests that Jesus had such inner sight. Story after story builds a picture of someone who not only taught with radical originality but who also was able to go to the core, we might say *the soul*, of those he encountered.

One such encounter is recalled in the long narrative we've just heard this morning, coming to us from the Fourth Gospel, John's Gospel, the one that is less interested in objective history and more interested in inner light.

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<sup>1</sup> Lusseyran's story is told in his book, *And There was Light* (Morning Light Press, Sandpoint, ID). In this sermon I rely on Huston Smith's discussion of light, physics and soul in his *Why Religion Matters* (Harper San Francisco, esp. chapter 8).

In fact, in contrast to our story last week, where the distinguished teacher Nicodemus came in the dark of night to learn from Jesus, we're told that Jesus took time out to rest from a journey, stopped at a well to talk with a woman, and it was noon— the time of the day with the greatest light.

That contrast between dark and light is a blunt clue from this ancient literature that the nocturnal Nicodemus was doomed to not understand, and that this woman, addressed in the light high noon, and in the most intimate terms, would have a breakthrough understanding. She would see even though she should not have been able to see. Unlike Jacques Lusseyran, the woman at the well was not blind, but she was a woman in a time and place of such severe compartmentalization of women that we can't imagine. She had had five husbands and was currently living with a man not her husband—slightly interesting today but unthinkable then. She was a Samaritan, member of a despised and heretical religious sect. A *fallen* people might be a better word.

I know that people draw certainties from this story (and others like it). I don't think that's what John's gospel was up to. I regard it as a near miracle that this story was written at all— you can think of so many reasons not to have imagined it or included it. But I think it survived as a suggestion of just how radical the style of religion or spiritual living Jesus was advocating.

At its root, the story verifies how important it is *to have intimate and serious conversation about important things*.

Carl Jung's colleague Heinrich Zimmer, who studied sacred images as a key to psychological transformation, famously said that "the best things cannot be talked about, and the second-best things are almost always misunderstood." We spend life yammering about third-best things.

In the current Broadway revival of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there's a scene when Ernest is trying to woo Gwendolyn, but can only stammer and say inane things.

"Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing," Gwendolyn reproves when Ernest mentions what a charming day it has been. "Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous."

It's sad to go through life not meaning what we say, or not asking the questions that really are within us, or to not be curious about what matters until it's too late. Or, we might have full physical sight and yet never develop, as Lusseyran was forced to find, an inner sight.

Real spiritual inquiry or conversation breaks boundaries, the way Jesus did with the woman at the well. Ask yourself: when was the last time I talked with someone about what's truly important? And if you have had such a conversation, were you truly open to where it would lead?

What we know is that real theology, spirituality, religion or just plain search for meaning, must be grounded in what we can discover and not imposed from on high or from the outside. It's never propositional or credal, and it's certainly not forced.

The very best theologians over the millennia have been clear that you can't really verbalize God anyway. You can point in the direction, you can suggest, and sense, and wonder, and explore.

It's like inner light, or living water. It leads, as it did that noonday in ancient Samaria, to a place not yet on a map: a place and a time when "true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."

And it leads not to my theology, my church, my place, but to that place where all hearts meet. You are not yet there, but if you are not open to a deep and holy conversation about that "there," you are missing something.

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