

**American Association of Pastoral Counselors  
35th Annual Convention, Miami-Biscayne Bay, Florida  
"Spiritual Life and Professional Practice"**

**Plenary Address: Friday, April 24th, 1997. John J. McNeill**

**The Role of Psychotherapy in Spiritual Journeys:  
Finding the Ego in Order to Let Go of It.**

First of all I want to say how greatly honored I was to be asked to address all of you here. I always have had a profound admiration and respect for this organization, especially for its effort to cultivate professionally the human skills of its members so that they can be effective instruments of God's healing and compassion. [especially want to thank Margaret Kornfeld and Han van den Blink for the role they played in inviting me here. I hope and pray that I can live up to their expectations.

I choose to center this talk on the interface between psychic growth and spiritual growth. I will base this talk primarily in my own 72 year old struggle to grow more healthy and mature in psyche and spirit. Over the last two years I have been writing my autobiography. I expect a September release from Westminster/John Knox Press and I like the title: *Both Feet Firmly Planted in Midair: The Spiritual Journey of John McNeill*. What I will share with you here will be developed more fully in that memoir.

One key presupposition of this talk is that "grace builds on nature", or in the words of St. Irenaeus: *Gloria Dei, Homo Vivens*, The glory of God are humans fully alive. I'll never forget my great joy many years ago as a novice in the Jesuits: when I discovered a book in the novitiate library entitled: "Neurotic Sanctity", I remember thinking: "Maybe I have a chance after all!". While it is true that God's grace can overcome any psychic woundedness to produce a saint; still God's ordinary way of working is by building on a healthy psychic substructure. What is good psychologically, then, will be good spiritually and vice versa. Clearly, a belief system that destroys human psychic health cannot serve the glory of God.

My second presupposition has to do with terminology. I would like to make my own, once again, a famous saying of the French essayist Montaigne: "Words are slippery planks set on a marsh; we must step on them lightly, pass over them swiftly; lest they sink beneath us." I am acutely aware of the danger of a superficial reductionism in an undertaking such as this. I will be passing back and forth between two distinct disciplines of psychotherapy and spirituality, but I do not intend to try to integrate; or reduce one to the other of these two radically different perspectives on the human person. At best we can hope to indicate certain continuities and discontinuities. In both disciplines words are used to point at inner experiences that can not be objectified without distortion.

Both of these disciplines can use the same word with completely opposite connotations, For example, the use of the word "ego" in my topic for today's talk:  
"The Role of Psychotherapy in Spiritual Journeys: Finding an Ego in Order to Let

Go of It." When I finished writing this talk I realized that my title is misleading. I will be dealing equally with the subject of how spirituality affects psychotherapy. Therefore, the title should read "The Reciprocal Influence of Psychotherapy and Spirituality"

Freud provided us with two formulations that indicate the direction and aim of psychotherapeutic growth — to make the unconscious conscious, or, more fully *"Wo es war soll ich werden."* This can be translated literally as "Where it was, let the I become," where "it" signifies the impersonal and the unconscious and "I" signifies the personal and the conscious. As Loewald points out, these formulations imply a conception of human nature, promoting the individual's consciousness, fostering ego development; taking responsibility for one's self and one's unconscious. The *soll* or "shall" indicates the setting of a goal for growth. The idea of responsibility in its most basic sense refers to the ability of the I or self to transpose the chaos of raw experience, id drives, energies locked into the irrational compulsions of the superego onto a meaningful personal plane.

To shift into a theological perspective and terminology, we can, out of our own freedom be co-creators of our very self in cooperation with the divine spirit dwelling with, in us. *"Veni creator spiritus; mentes tuorum visita. Imple superna gratia quae tu creasti pectora."* Come, Holy Spirit, enter into our psyche and fill with divine grace the heart which you have created.

The original translators of Freud's work into English chose to translate "es" and "ich" in the more esoteric Latin words *id* and *ego*. *Ego* became the name of the authentic, free, conscious, personal self and strengthening the ego by giving it control over the energies of the "id" and "superego" became the goal of therapy. (Again a second correction of my title seems in order. We never "let go of" the ego in the Freudian sense.. That ego must mature and be transformed in such a way that it can help us in the spiritual journey).

The word *ego* had close to the opposite meaning in most spiritual traditions. In Western Christian tradition this word was used to indicate the immature, prideful self that will not, acknowledge any dependence on others or on the divine. In Eastern tradition the ego frequently refers to the illusion of a separate self that stands in the way of enlightenment. Spiritual growth consists, then, of breaking through that illusion and experiencing our oneness with the universe. In both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions, having a strong and healthy ego in the Freudian sense of the term is, I believe, essential to having a healthy and mature spiritual life. We must possess our ego before we can freely let go of it (or, preferably allow it to mature and be transformed.). Otherwise our relationship to the divine or the universe will not be based on a free participation but on a symbiotic absorption.

A final caution which I wish to raise here at the onset has to do with my understanding of spiritual life. Because of my background, I will be dealing with spiritual life generically from within the Western Christian tradition which envisions spiritual life as the life that comes from the indwelling of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of love, within our psyche (which, I believe using other terminology is a universal experience common to all the great spiritual traditions). Specifically, I will use the tradition of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, the

founder of the Jesuits, in his *Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*. These rules are based on the belief that God speaks to us from within our psyche and we can tune in to God's voice speaking to us primarily from within our feelings. Whenever we place an action in conformity with the divine spirit of love, we can experience the presence of the divine spirit empowering us from within. That experience will take the form of feelings of deep peace and joy. I shall do my best to deal with insights that are present in a parallel way in all great spiritual traditions.

The original title I gave this talk was "*Tapping Deeper Roots*" I would like to draw attention to the symbolism of that title. The implication is that there are even greater and more profound resources in the depths of the human psyche than those that can be tapped by a purely secular depth psychology. Those healing depths can be reached only by means of a spiritual discipline. The most effective spiritual discipline that I have discovered personally from within my own spiritual tradition is the practice of centering prayer. (The best book I know describing this form of prayer is Thomas Keating's, *Intimacy with God*. (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

One of the most universal symbols of the spiritual life is the image of a deep well of spiritual energy. In the title of his book on the spirituality of the religious liberation communities of Central and South America, Gustavo Gutierrez used a famous saying of Saint Bernard of Clairveaux concerning the spiritual life: "We must drink from our own wells! Spirituality," Gutierrez says, "is like living water that springs up from the very depths of your own personal experience of faith." To drink from your own well is to reflect on your own unique encounter with the divine at the depth of your psyche.

### *Possessing an Ego*

I first entered into psychotherapy when I began the training program at the Blanton Peale Graduate Institute in New York in 1976. I was already 51 years old and I had no idea how deeply wounded I was both in my psyche and in my spiritual life, and how much healing therapy could provide. I began training and therapy because I had just founded Dignity, New York, an organization for Catholic lesbians and gays, and I quickly realized that I could not help them without first attempting to heal my own woundedness.

The Institute wisely recognized that the primary path to a deep, personal knowledge of how therapy cures was to personally participate in as thorough a therapeutic experience as possible. For the first time I underwent a treatment of my own. I had the good luck of choosing as my therapist, Arnold Rachman, a brilliant, insightful, compassionate and highly skilled therapist. For the next four years we worked together twice a week on individual therapy and once a week in group therapy sessions. I had no idea how badly wounded I had been in my growing up --- by the death of my mother, by my father's emotional distance, by the trauma of growing up a self-hating gay man, by my prisoner of war experiences, and by my exposure to pathological religion. With Arnold's skilled help, I was able to raise most of these issues to consciousness and begin the process and with God's help, of freeing myself from their pathological grip on my life. Through my own therapeutic process I learned firsthand the skills I would need to help my clients, for the most part other gay and lesbian clients.

The first and deepest wound in my psyche resulted from the death of my mother and the emotional withdrawal of my father when I was four years old. I emerged from that experience with my basic trust in the universe and God deeply wounded. How could I trust a God who would, as I saw it, take away my mother because I was a bad boy. I began at that point to relate to God primarily as an object of fear. "Perfect love," John tells us in his first epistle, "casts out all fear." But I had the experience of near-to-perfect fear casting out all love. I remember as a youth reciting the act of contrition "Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell" The words went on "but most of all because you are all good and deserving of all my love." but I could only identify with the fear of the opening line. Beaver in his book, *Psychotherapy and Growth: A Family Systems Perspective*, claims there is a direct connection between the kind of parenting and the degree to which one's religious beliefs are healthy or pathological. Those who had good loving parents will be open to a liberating message of love from their religion, Loving parents can "defang the poisons of religion" and allow the child to receive only its benefits, In contrast children who did not adequately experience the love of parents will tend to create for themselves an unloving God-whom they obey out of fear. This contradicts Jesus' basic message As Paul put it "You were not called to a spirit of slavery to let fear into your life again, you were called to a spirit of adoption, You have the right to call your God "Abba"" ( the infant's word of total trust for a loving mother and father).

Part of my therapeutic process was to bring into full conscious awareness all hidden belief systems with their accompanying feelings of fear, shame guilt and low self-esteem, so that they can be challenged by the healthy religious values of the conscious ego. My favorite prayer at this stage was a collect from the second Sunday in Advent: "Lord, remove the blindness that cannot know you; relieve the fear that hides me from your face."

The second major wound in my psyche had to do with my homosexuality. Growing up in a homophobic family, church and culture I internalized that homophobia; this resulted in a very low self image, As Winnicott said: "Every child knows in its bones that in its wickedness lies hope, but in its conformity and false socialization lies despair," Because of my gayness I grew up thinking that there was something radically wrong with me and my only hope was to repress that self and conform to the expectations of my family, church and culture.

The first result of that self-hatred was, again, a wound in my ability to trust God and the universe, How could I trust a God who created me in such a way that my desire to reach out in love was fundamentally evil? As a gay man my faith was above all else involved with the virtue of trust. Hans Kung, in his book, *Does God Exist?* makes the point that the essential psychological foundation and presupposition for faith is trust. Eric Erikson claims that the first task of the human infant is to learn basic trust. This trust is the cornerstone of a psychologically healthy personality; without it a decent human life is impossible. No deep intimacy, no true friendship, no vital faith is possible until we risk trusting.

**My primary challenge, then, was to allow myself to experience the ecstasy and blessing that all life is; to experience the goodness of all creation and its essential, ultimate trustworthiness. It is trust that allows us to play all our lives like children in the presence of a loving parent. It allows us to know the joy and ecstasy of creation, nature, friendship, art, poetry, music, dance, noncompulsive work, noncompetitive sport, sexuality in the service of love.**

**Still another wound arose from my internalized homophobia. At an even deeper level all homophobia is, I believe, feminophobia, a distrust and repression of the feminine dimension of the psyche.. Because of that feminophobia I distrusted and repressed my feelings and tried to live in my head.( I earned seven academic degrees in that effort!) This seriously wounded my ability to be open to the spiritual life. God speaks to us primarily through our heart, that is to say, through our feelings. As medieval theologians like to put it: "You can grasp God with your mind, never; you can grasp God with your heart, ever!" If we are cut off from our feelings we cannot hear what God is saying to us directly through our experiences and are left dependent on external voices to try to discern what God wants of us. As Maurice Blondel said, "Our God dwells within us and the only way we can become one with our God is to become one with our authentic self," My authentic self was a gay self, so the only spiritual journey I could take was the journey into self-acceptance and take the chance that God could love the authentic me.**

**John Fortnato in his classic work on lesbian and gay spirituality, *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys of Gay Christians*, makes the point that there is a special need for a spiritual dimension in the therapy of lesbians and gays. The more they become healthy and accept and love themselves, the more they will want to come out of the closet. But as soon as they come out of the closet they can expect rejection and a deeper experience of exile in a heterosexual world. Fortnato states that the psychological and spiritual growth of a gay or lesbian person depends on being able to let go of wanting to be part of the myth of finding our ultimate meaning in the structures of this world. We must go through a process of mourning and give up the myth of belonging and replace that longing with a deeper personal process of spiritual growth.**

**What gay people ultimately have to give up is attachment to rejection and the need for people (incapable or unwilling to do so) to affirm their wholeness and lovableness. It works like this: if you can't get confirmation of your wholeness and your rightful place in the universe from people and the myth, you have to look beyond them. You have no choice but to get it from someplace else, someplace deeper, someplace more cosmic.**

**If you give up denying, fighting, and wallowing in the oppression, you stop being stuck in the mud. Off you go, down the road. You begin to see that freedom and a sense of belonging aren't to be found in the myth at all. They never were. You begin to understand what Jesus meant when he said: "Mine is not a kingdom of this world." (John 18:36)**

The spiritual process of accepting our exile status in this world and giving up the myth that we can find our meaning exclusively in this world can result in great spiritual freedom. This freedom can help us to live fearlessly and authentically in this world. By deepening our spiritual life, we can turn what many see as the curse of gayness, the curse of being a social outcast into spiritual gold. Matthew Kelty, a Trappist monk, speaks of this aspect of gayness in his book, *Flute Song Solo: Reflections of a Trappist Hermit*.

Sometimes I wish I were more like others. I am aware of a difference; some insight into things; some capacity for the poetic and the spiritual which, if not exceptional - and it is not - is still strong enough to set me off from others. Nor do I hesitate to say that this has some relationship to homosexuality. People of my kind seem often so placed, the reason, as I have worked it out, that they are more closely related to the *anima* than is usual... The man with a strong *anima* will always experience some inadequacy until he comes to terms with his inner spirit and establishes communion - no small achievement. Until then he cannot act truly as a complete person, since he is not one. The unhappy experience of many is that they are unable to relate in depth to others, not aware that their problem is a lack of communion with themselves.

Still another level of woundedness that I had to deal with in therapy came from my experience as a combat infantryman in World War II and my six months as a prisoner of war in Germany. These experiences increased my low self image. I felt totally inadequate to the demands put on me as a combat soldier and was badly demoralized by the terror and starvation I lived with in prison camp. But even in the midst of that pain and terror there were moments of awareness of God's presence and love. One example of courage based on faith impressed me so deeply that it influenced the rest of my life. A group of us American prisoners, who were close to starvation were sent out on a work detail to a farm where SS officers were raising mink. Our job was to chop firewood. An Eastern European slave laborer was working close to me, mixing a mash for the animals. The mash included real potatoes and carrots. I could not take my eyes off the food. He must have detected my starving condition, for when the guard's back was turned, he reached into the mash and threw me a potato. If the guard had caught him, the laborer would almost certainly have been killed. I quickly hid the potato in my jacket and tried to signal a thanks to him, His only response was to make the sign of the cross. That sign of the cross was like a flash of lightning on a dark night. Here was a man who was willing to risk his life to feed me, a stranger, and he found that courage and his freedom from fear in his religious faith. I date my vocation to the priesthood from that moment. My constant prayer from then on was that God would grant me the courage never to be ruled by fear. I wanted to be free enough to reach out, no matter what the cost, to help someone who needed me. I know that my vocation and ministry would demand of me the fearlessness and courage to reach out and share the suffering of others.

I became intensely aware that evil's primary instrument in this world is fear. If I could attain with God's grace a profound awareness of God's personal love for me, I could be freed from the personal grip that fear had on my life. I made my own the open-

ing prayer of the liturgy of the fifth Sunday in lent: \*<sup>6</sup>Help us, Lord, to embrace the world you have given us, and to fearlessly transform the darkness of its pain into the life and joy of Easter."

### ***Letting Go of (Transforming) the Ego***

The most perfect expression of a philosophy of spiritual life that I know of is that of *The Philosophy of Action* of Maurice Blondel. Blondel defined philosophy as "life itself insofar as it attempts to achieve a clear reflexive consciousness of itself. He took his central insight from a verse in Scripture: "...but whoever does the truth comes out into the light." (John 3:21). Blondel saw human life as a continual dialectic between thought and action. There is a kind of subjective experiential knowing that arises from human choice and action and that cannot be achieved in any other way.

In our search for self-fulfillment, according to Blondel, we come across a category of human choices and actions that are simultaneously "necessary and impossible," necessary if we are to achieve human fulfillment, but impossible by human means alone. This is a difficult category of action to hold onto. We are tempted to insist that if these choices are necessary for human fulfillment, then they must be capable of being achieved by human means alone. On the other hand, if they are impossible to achieve by human means alone, then they cannot be necessary. Despite this internal contradiction, this category of action spontaneously arises within human consciousness in our striving for fulfillment. The only way to move forward when we encounter this category is to open ourselves to a paradoxically immanent/transcendent source of energy and power.

"We can reach the spiritual depths of our psyche" Blondel tells us, "by being willing to go deep within ourselves until we reach the point where that which is from ourselves ceases and yet there is a possibility of more." The key member of this category of the necessary and impossible is the action of loving. Genuine human love is essential to human fulfillment but impossible by human means alone. This is why scripture can say, "My dear friends, let us love one another, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)

Within the immanent context of the dialectic of human action, the source of the necessary idea of God as transcendent power is understood as our projecting out of all the unused and unusable potentiality of the human spirit. "Humans can never succeed by their own powers alone to place in their willed action all that which is at the origin of their voluntary activity." Thus, God represents that which is necessary for the human, if we are to achieve a state of self-adequation.

By self-adequation Blondel understood that we have achieved a harmony between what we have willed and the deepest longings in our psyche. "What we can know of God is the surplus of interior life which demands its employment; we cannot, then, know God without willing in some way to become God!" As Blondel stated:

**"To equal him or her self and to be saved, a human must go beyond him or her self. To consent to an invasion of all that stands for a life that is prior and a will that is superior to ours, is our way of contributing to our own creation. To will all that we will in complete sincerity of heart is to place in us the being and action of God. No doubt it does cost something, since we do not perceive how profoundly this will is our own. But one must give all for the all. Life has a divine value, despite the weakness of pride and sensuality, humanity is generous enough to want to belong more completely to the one who exacts more of it."**

**Many traditional analysts would identify any action that is impossible by human means alone as an illusion and see their therapeutic task as disabusing their clients of their illusions. I frequently detect a strong element of Stoicism in secular analytic writing. I am reminded of the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius' letters to his subjects: "Citizens, do not fall in love. For everyone who loves desires immortality, but it is not given to the human to be immortal. Remember, human, that in a little while you will be nobody, nowhere. Take great consolation in that thought!"**

**In contrast to that the Christian message is always fall in love, for love participates in the divine and is immortal of its very nature, Sebastian Moore has written a beautiful book entitled, *Jesus: Liberator of desire*. "What we learn from Christ," Moore writes, "is the difference between liberation from desire (the latter equated with the insatiable self-promoting ego) and the liberation of desire from the chains of my customary way of being myself. Two contrary views of asceticism present themselves here. The conventional view is that it means denying ourselves things we want. A more discerning and disconcerting view is that it means dropping things we no longer want, admitting to ourselves that we no longer want them, and thus giving our journey, our story, a chance to move on." To say that we are created in the image and likeness of God means that there is a necessary craving in the human heart for intimacy with God by achieving a share in divine life. As we pray in the liturgy: "Grant us, O Lord a share in your divinity, just as you choose to share in our humanity."**

### ***My Spiritual Life Today***

**I would like to bring this paper to a close by saying a few words about my spiritual life today. I am now 72 years old. I have discovered that every decade of my life has been happier and more peaceful than the last. Each decade has brought with it a greater intimacy with a God of mercy and love and a greater trust in God's love for me. As my body grows older, my spirit becomes younger. I know this is a gift from God for which I am grateful.**

**As the years have gone by my prayer life has undergone a radical change from a prayer of the head — words, concepts, thought processes -- to a prayer of the heart, God has given me the grace to be continuously aware of a longing in my heart for greater intimacy with God. My awareness of God is based on what I am deprived of, what I need and don't have, what I am yearning for, what I have a hunger and thirst for and have not yet achieved.**

**Privation is a paradoxical concept. Philosophers define privation as "the absence of that which ought to be." Privation then is the experience of absence in presence or presence in absence. To experience God as privation, then, necessarily means that somehow I have already had an experience of God's presence. I like to compare it to a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle. If I see it, I will know it, because there is only one piece that will fit into the empty space in my heart. "You made us for yourself, Oh Lord, and our hearts will never rest until they rest in you!"**

**My personal knowledge of God has little to do with intellectual definition. The great mystics recommended in prayer that we should empty our minds of thoughts and concepts and enter the cloud of unknowing. My knowledge of God comes from the hunger and thirst in myself. In the words of Psalm 63:**

**O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you; my  
flesh faints for you, as in a  
dry and weary land where  
there is no water.**

**My prayer life consists, then, in being in touch with that hunger and thirst, not letting anything fill it in or block it off. Rather, I strive to be in touch with that hunger and thirst, to consecrate it by converting it intentionally into prayer and identifying with it. I spend a lot of time just being in touch with that longing, being open to it, and waiting. I continually ask God to come and meet the deep deprivation within me. I am like a desert waiting for the rain to come and soak in. As a result my prayer is continuous. Still I do set aside some time each day to enter into myself, empty out all thoughts and rest in the presence of God and experience the longing for that God.**

**At a recent Easter vigil I heard this passage from the Psalms: "As a deer longs for the flowing waters, so my soul longs for you, O God." (Pa 42:1) Suddenly I was in touch with a profound longing for union with God, a longing that was at the same time painful and pleasurable, and I began to cry, I am grateful to God for that moment and see it as a great grace. Since that time I have an even deeper awareness that what I want is intimacy with God and I will not settle for anything less. I am aware that being in touch with that longing is already a kind of awareness of God through privation. This awareness is God's gift and promise. All other touches of intimacy in my life, intimacies of family, friendships, my intimacy with my lover of the past thirty-two years, Charlie, are foretastes of that ultimate intimacy. But the only intimacy that can ultimately meet my needs and fill my heart is the intimacy with God. I am certainly not advocating here any form of dualism. Everything that is authentically human plays a role in my journey to God. As Ignatius put it in his Spiritual Exercises: "All the good things of the created world belong to us, but the glory belongs to God! Or as Meister Eckhart expressed it: "If the only prayer you ever offered in your life was one heartfelt "Thank you, God!" that would suffice for salvation."**

**I particularly love these words of St. Augustine's prayer:**

Late have I loved you, O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new; late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.

You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all.

You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and now I long for your peace.

Notice that in this prayer God is seen as the one who takes the initiative. The great spiritual leaders of the past have always taught that God in fact nurtures our growth in capacity and potential for a passionate intimate relationship with God. My own experience of spiritual development finds its closest description in the understanding of spiritual growth in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory describes beautifully the step-by-step nature of spiritual growth. He says that God always waits on our freedom. Our first serious "Yes!" to God enables divine love to begin to act within us. Our inner space, as a result of that "Yes!" is then ready to receive something of God. God fills that space as fully as we are able to accept. At the same time, this filling enlarges the space, and we long for more. Thus, the lover of God is always filled to her or his capacity and always longs for more of God. Yet this longing does not bring frustration because there is a fullness.

According to Gregory, this process goes on beyond death into eternity because God is infinite and we are always a finite capacity open to further growth in our identity with an infinite God. For all eternity, we continue to grow deeper and deeper in union with a God who is infinite and, therefore, can never be exhausted.

The most difficult spiritual struggle for me is the endeavor to center myself in God and the love of God versus the ravenous hunger in my ego to make itself the center of the universe. I am aware of a very real danger, that if God were to give me even a taste of the joy of God's presence and love, my ego could go completely out of control. I am likely to start searching to experience God's love as an ego fix, trying to use God as an object of my own ego satisfaction and my own feelings of superiority and specialness. Of course God will not let God's self be used in that way. In God's goodness, God allows my spirit to be plunged into the dark night of the soul, until I am ready to experience God's love in such a way that it only contributes to the greater glory of God.

I understand well the Sufi prayer: "Give me the pain of your love, O Lord, and not the joy. Give the joy to others, but give me the pain." The pain of God's love is the longing for that love from a sense of deprivation. That pain purifies me and makes me ready to experience the positive joy of God's presence. So in moments of dark night, I

**make an act of trust that through this emptiness and privation God is purifying me and making me ready to share in God's joy.**

**How do I go about lessening the grip of the ego on my life in this second and spiritual sense? The first thing I had to learn is that this process is completely out of my control and power. Trying to loosen the power of my ego is the equivalent of trying to lift myself by my own bootstraps. Only God can lessen the grip of my ego on my life by touching my heart with God's loving presence. One tiny touch of God's presence and I am outside myself in ecstasy and my ego is swallowed up in the glory and goodness of God. The only power I have in all this is out of my freedom to invite God in. I can ask God to come and purify me and make me worthy of the experience of God's love. I have reached the point now where I can invite God in and mean it: Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, Come! As a young man dealing with a God of fear, I used to pray: Wait! Lord Jesus! Wait! One of my favorite prayers at this time are the words we say in the Catholic liturgy after the Lord's Prayer: "Deliver us, Lord, from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ. Come, Lord Jesus, Come! Come Spirit of love and fill my heart!"**

**I find myself, in retirement, daily becoming more fully identified with these words from John of the Cross' Spiritual Canticle:**

**Forever at God's door I  
give my heart, and soul,  
my fortune too. I've no  
flock anymore, no other  
work in view my occupa-  
tion "Love", it's all I do.**

**I intend to continue my spiritual struggle to center my life in God. Whatever time and energy I have left I will use to the best of my ability to bring the message of God's love to everybody and especially to gays, lesbians, transsexuals and transgendered people. I hope someday to be united with a vast crowd of colleagues, friends, family and my gay brothers and sisters in heaven, where eternally we will not only celebrate God's goodness but actually share in it. Thanks be to God!**

**John J. McNeill**