

## Symbol Ritual and Dementia

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**SUMMARY.** This article draws on the experiences of prayer of people with dementia. After pointing to the profoundly symbolic nature of all human beings and presenting a theology of symbol and ritual expressive of the Christian tradition, it argues that symbol and ritual can enable people with dementia to express what is ultimately of most meaning in their lives. Carers sensitive and responsive to the inherently symbolic nature of people with dementia can nourish and enrich their relationship with the divine. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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### Introduction

Joan is a woman in a nursing home who has dementia. A confused restlessness overshadows her spirit most of the day. Faces, names and events are fading. There is a sense of darkness encroaching as the sun sets. Yet, each evening when the twilight becomes night, agitation transposes to tranquility in the ritual of preparing for sleep. When she is

safely tucked in bed, words that were etched in the depth of her being since childhood flow, calming her, drawing her to peace. Joan recites: *Hail holy queen, mother of mercy, hail our life our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry poor banished children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then most gracious advocate thine eyes of mercy towards us and after this our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus ...*

Peter has dementia. He is now bedridden. He seems vacant, distant, disconnected from past and present relationships. His shallow breathing is the only tangible reminder of the full generous life he lived. The gradual loss of all his faculties is slow and painful. Now all that seems left is his humanity. He is a human being breathing with the breath of the divine. His son, Dan sits beside him, holding his hand. The touch comforts, consoles. Dan becomes conscious of his own breath breathing in union with the breath of his father. Silently Dan recites the words of a hymn he and his father sang at Church when he was a child: *Breathe on me breath of God ...* His father's breath becomes more rhythmical. Dan knows his father is dying, he knows that the last breath his father will take will unite him finally with the breath of eternal love.

Norah, a parish Eucharistic minister noticed an elderly man, Fred, living alone in a block of flats. Fred has the first signs of dementia. Norah knows that at one time in his life Fred was a member of a parish so she invites him to go to the Sunday Eucharist. When Fred enters the church he becomes disorientated, afraid, he doesn't

know what to do. Norah takes his hand and gently leads him to a seat. His loud voice echoes in the silent church as he asks what is happening. Norah compassionately responds. The priest recognises Fred's disorientation and brings him communion. When Fred receives the body of Christ he becomes calm. The deep silence evoked by divine presence permeates his being. Some years later when Fred is bedridden, Norah brings him communion. Because Fred is unable to swallow, Norah places the host in his hand. Enfolded in the palm of his hand this fragment of bread, Christ's body, connects him with the deepest meaning of Eucharist.

Jacinta has little verbal language. She just sits and rocks in her chair moaning. The rocking and moaning enable Jacinta to grieve, to express her fear, her confusion, her longing for love. The moaning becomes a rhythmic chant, a centering, a wordless lament that expresses her raw vulnerability and her experience of the absence of God. Her haunting cries communicate her desperate need to feel God's presence.

These brief sketches portray people who have dementia. They tell of people at a critical phase in their lives, where all that they are and have lived, is gathered into a silence that may never again be recognised as language. These portraits express the paradoxical nature of our living and dying. On one hand, they evoke our collective memory of human vulnerability. They confront us with our own incompleteness, and our ingrained resistance to the absolute letting go and surrender that ageing necessarily brings. Viewed through the lens of human isolation from

the divine, they intimate that ultimately we exist in a groundless, disconnected, meaningless world. Yet these stories also speak of the human capacity for transcendence and freedom. They embody authentic Christian hope. They tell of the strength of the human spirit reminding us that though the external expressions of our humanity may diminish, the love of God has been poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5). The word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). God is present as our flesh diminishes. There is within us a ground of divinity that has been, is, and always will be, one with the divine. These portraits challenge us to remember what is of most value in our lives.

## Memory

One of the foundational characteristics of Christians is that we are a people with a long memory. Authors of the sacred scriptures remember stories of relationship with divine presence. The author of Deuteronomy recognises the critical nature of memory: *Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your eyes have seen nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to your children's children* (Deut 4:9). Do not forget the wisdom of past experience. When Jesus of Nazareth took bread and wine and blessed them, his words: *Do this in remembrance of me* (Lk 22:19b), became the centrifuge of Christian communal memory. Jesus invites his followers to perpetuate his symbolic action, to reenact, to relive what he has done. Memory serves the function of integrating present experience with the mystery of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ongoing presence

with us. In a contemporary context, a similar phrase, *Lest we forget* is etched into the consciousness of Australians eager not to forget the suffering and heartache of war, and Lois Bunuel poignantly voices a common perception:

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing. (Sacks 1986, 22)

In one sense, the passage from Deuteronomy expresses an essential truth. Remembering and passing on what is of value is crucial. Christians without a memory cannot consciously live the paschal mystery. A culture without a memory will quickly spiral into nothing. So is Bunuel correct? Is life without memory no life at all? Are we nothing without a memory? What then does this mean for people with dementia who have forgotten the things that their eyes have seen, who cannot recognise their children, let alone pass on to them what was of most value in their lives? What does this mean for people who cannot remember the history of their relationship with God? Has Christian theology something to say to us when we are most vulnerable and in danger of being described as *nothing*?

In this paper I will show how Christian theology does have a response to make to people who, having forgotten, are in danger of becoming the forgotten. Christian hope inspires us to look beyond the surface

into the heart of humanity mutually enclosed in a dynamic trinitarian relationship. After drawing on the theological tradition that affirms the intrinsic goodness of humanity, I will elucidate how life with conscious memory fragmenting, is life. People with no capacity to recall events and describe them in coherent language are human beings with a ground of their being in divinity.

First, I will show how essentially human beings abide in love by presenting insights from *The Revelations of Divine Love* composed by Julian of Norwich (1342-1420). Julian's theology and anthropology emphasise the indissolubility of the divine-human encounter. Created with our being in God there is a ground of our being, a sacred centre that is the home of, the dwelling place of the divine. I will illustrate how, within this primordial place of union or *oneing* with divine love there is, what might be described, as an ontological memory where we are eternally one with God. This place of eternal oneness is so intrinsic to our humanity it can never be erased.

Second, drawing on a Christian theology of symbol, I will show how symbol and ritual can assist us to be in touch with the ground of our being where we are one with God. I will then demonstrate how the repetitive use of symbol and ritual can enable people with dementia to be in touch with their memory of union with God at the depths of their being.

Third, in keeping with authors such as Malcolm Goldsmith, Tom Kitwood (1997) and Jane Verity (1995), who argue that a dynamic relationship

with people can enable the person with dementia to have a less fragmented sense of self and sustain a dynamic part in a social world with other people, (Goldsmith 1996). I will take this emphasis on relationship one step further and argue that if a person with dementia is companioned by people who are sensitive to the divinity of their humanity, and are responsive to the myriad of hints they give of their true selves one with the divine, they can nourish this divine human relationship. Caregivers who have an appreciation that being in the present moment in all our fragility and incompleteness is sacred, can enable people with dementia to experience glimpses of divine love. De Luca's poem describing her pastor captures my nuance here:

... Bits of sentences collapse  
Between brain and mouth:  
A computer file struck  
by a virus. Gaps which dangle  
between nouns are too big  
for leaps of inference;  
there is anxiety  
in both words and pauses:  
it is tempting to smooth  
their edges with inconsequential.  
Having lost the past and future  
It seems that you are pure being;

That you have made each instant  
your stillest dwelling ...

(Goldsmith, 53)

De Luca recognises the dynamic of Christian paradox powerfully expressed in the lives of people with dementia. How easy it is to mask the shattered edges of a broken self with labels that dismiss human vulnerability as inconsequential. But De Luca sees beyond the surface into the heart of the person struggling with dementia. *Having lost past and future it seems that you are pure being. You have made each instant your stillest dwelling.* Paul's description of the crucified resonates: what on the surface looks like folly does in fact reveal the power and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:25). This is the paradoxical insight expressed in Christian mystical literature: Unless a grain of wheat falls upon the ground and dies it remains a single grain but if it dies then it bears much fruit (Jn 12:24). Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (Lk 17:33). Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first (Mt 19:30).

### Abiding in Love

The most unifying belief expressed in Christian understanding is that God is love. We read in the first letter of John "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us" (1 Jn 4:16 b-17). Throughout history mystics and prophets have called us to rejuvenate our awareness that we are grounded in a trinitarian love, as love, beloved and lover. They invite us to recognise

that God is present to us in being and doing as love. We exist in relationship with a personal God whose way of being present, being with, and being for, is Love. Julian of Norwich gives us a theology that can inform our understanding of how we exist in this love. During an experience of illness where she thinks she is going to die, in the midst of the deepest darkness, light illuminates a crucifix and the Crucified becomes one with her experience of crucifixion. After reflecting on the experience, in the autumn of her life, Julian writes a theology of love. She uses language that can help us envisage the absolute fecundity of divine loving. She acclaims the wonder of a love that draws all things into unity. In Julian's words: *God never began to love humankind; for just as humankind will be in endless bliss, fulfilling God's joy with regard to God's works, just so has that same humankind been known and loved ... without beginning ...* (16:84.283).<sup>1</sup> There is one history of love founded in the eternity of God that originates before the creation of human nature. She continues to describe how extravagant this love is:

... in our making God knit and oned us to God's self, and through this oneing we are kept as pure and as noble as we were made. By the power of that precious oneing we love our Maker, delight in our Maker, praise, thank and endlessly rejoice in our Maker. And this is the work which is constantly performed in every soul. (14:58.293)

Human beings are *knit* and *oned* to the Trinity at creation and are kept in a relationship of *oneing*. This relationship of *oneing* sustains us all the days of our lives. *Oneing* is a Middle English word often translated as uniting, but

Julian's concept of *oneing* is more powerful and dynamic than uniting. Julian's idea of *oneing* is virtually untranslatable. *Oneing* means to be one, united, joined, blended or fused (Brown 1993, 1998). Yet none of these words conveys the sense of this primordial interpenetration of the divine and the human that preserves difference in identity. There is something indefinable about the union that *oneing* conveys. Julian couples the terms *knitting* and *oneing* to help impart the intimacy of the union that *oneing* brings. *Knitting* draws together multiple allusions to threads being knit, bones being knit together and people being knit as in a marriage bond. *Knit* and *oned* to God human beings are irrevocably in relationship with the divine.

Each person of the Trinity plays a role in this *oneing*. At creation we are *oned* to God. In Julian's words: *for our nature which is the higher part, is knit to God in its creation* (14:57.291). The foundation of our potential to be fully one with God takes place in our gifted origins. We are further *knit* and *oned* to Christ in the incarnation: *our nature which is the higher part is knit to God as we are made, and God is knit to our nature which is the lower part in taking flesh* (14:57.17-19). We are also *knit* and *oned* to the Holy Spirit in the continual sharing of divine love through grace: *All blessed children who come out of God in nature will be returned to God by grace* (14:64.3-4). Human beings are created *one* within the Trinity within a relationship of *oneing*. Gifted in origins we are essentially one with divine love because God never disengages from this original *oneing* in any way that would separate the divine and the human.

Through being *knit* and *oned* to God there is an originating, ontological *oneing* that can never be eradicated. The constant increasing or deepening of this *oneing* occurs in *every soul* through the presence of Christ and the Spirit creating an existential *oneing* until human beings become totally at one with the beloved. If we relate Julian's theology of *oneing* to our memory of who we are in God, we can envisage our irrevocable union with God that can never be eradicated. Though on the surface we may not know of, or recognise this *oneing*, in the deepest depths of our true selves we always hold this memory of *oneing*.

Therefore, although a clear perception of this relationship of *oneing* may evade people with dementia (and people without dementia for that matter), there is at the depths our being an irrevocable union or *oneing* with God that can never be destroyed. In times of the loneliest suffering we are nourished from a centre that is eternally grounded in a relationship of *oneing*. Deeper than all the confusion and darkness, is a vision of a God of compassion who draws us to God's self. Critically, we will never recognise and penetrate this potential for *oneing* without embracing silence. And the only language that will give us access to this place of *oneing*, is the language of the soul, the language of the arts, of poetry, of metaphor and myth, language that engages our imaginations. The sterile language of abstraction, of cold analysis, of critical reasoning will not suffice. Only the language of the symbolic and its ritual expression can evoke this wonder of the deepest sense of who we are.

This has profound implications for people with dementia because while they lose discursive language and reasoning, their symbolic nature does not completely abandon them. Carers sensitive to the profoundly symbolic nature of people with dementia can create an environment where symbolic expression can function like an icon, becoming a doorway or window to the sacred, becoming a carrier of luminous light that can penetrate opaque darkness. Symbol and ritual can give us access to what seems inaccessible. Symbol and ritual can communicate what is of ultimate meaning and value to people with dementia.

## Symbol

The symbolic nature of human beings is recognised universally.<sup>2</sup> Within Catholic theology, however, symbols and symbolic knowledge have specific characteristics. Rahner explains: “Genuine symbols (symbolic realities)... are the highest and most primordial manner in which one reality can represent another” (Rahner 1974, 225).

Stressing the intrinsic symbolic nature of human beings Rahner explicates, “all beings are by their nature symbolic because they necessarily express themselves in order to attain their nature” (Rahner 1974, 225). It is intrinsic to human nature to long to be one with God to fully express who we are at the depths of our being in God. Rahner continues:

Something can make itself known because it is already present in the depths of the grounds of each one’s being. The being is known in the symbol without which it

cannot be known at all: thus it is the symbol in the original (transcendental) sense of the word. (Rahner 1974, 224)

Within human nature there is an original blessedness, something of the divine already present, a capacity for *oneing* that can be recognised and experienced through symbol. Dialectical in character, a symbol can hold opposites together in creative tension, maintain both unity and difference, and carry us to the place of divine human encounter, the place of *oneing*.

For Christians symbols mediate meaning in a way that touches into conscious and unconscious truths igniting invitation and evocation. They are potent and dynamic. They are catalysts that invite participation in a fullness that is beyond words and images. Symbols participate in and point to the immanence and transcendence of the divine. They reveal the essence of human existence enabling us to penetrate into the primordial ground of our being. Symbols evoke paradox. They simultaneously reveal and conceal. They mediate absence as well as presence. Thus symbols orientate us to the living wholeness of our relationship with God from our origins in God to our fulfilment in God. Simultaneously conveying meaning and shaping our response, symbols take us to a place of intimacy with God, of encounter with divine love and compassion, that is both immanent and transcendent, known and unknown.

Ritual

Ritual is a way of expression that has a familiar pattern, set repetitive objects, actions and words (Jorgenson 1993, 38). Our lives are full of everyday rituals that give meaning and security. Within Christianity there are formal rituals of the Church, liturgy and sacraments, but these flow from and express what is of most value to us in our every day rituals. In the context of people with dementia I want to concentrate on seemingly insignificant everyday rituals that if consciously and sensitively engaged with can assist them to be in touch with God who dwells in the ground of their being. Ritual is part of life, expressing the truths we live by and the relationships and beliefs that underlie our lives. Ritual marks sacred space and time, providing a way of connecting with our symbols, of expressing our deepest truths in symbolic action. Ritual reaffirms the human, enabling us to celebrate who we are and to acclaim the natural goodness and beauty found in creation. Ritual helps us to name our broken-ness and incompleteness, to grieve and to mourn. Because we exist within a relationship of *oneing* in the Trinity and because God became human ritual reminds us that our bodies, the stuff of our physical world is holy. Ritual enables us to express who we truly are, to live symbolically, to be in touch with the deepest reality of divine loving. Ritual draws participants into a deeper, often unconscious level of experience and meaning. Good ritual becomes liturgy where, as Regis Duffy captures so eloquently, the presence of God calls us to presence (Duffy 1982, 3). Ritual enables people who have *lost the past and future* to be present, to be *pure being*, and to make *each instant their stillest dwelling*.

## Dementia

Within the context of human beings having an ontological memory of a relationship of *oneing* that can never be eradicated, and being inherently symbolic, longing to bring the truth of our being to full expression, I now return to my original questions. I will show how carers can enable people with dementia to express what is of most value to them through the use of symbol and ritual. Symbol and ritual can enable those who are most vulnerable, those who no longer have access to analytical language, those who have forgotten the things that their eyes have seen, to be in touch with and to express what is most sacred and important in their lives. Our four stories give but brief examples.

As a Catholic child Joan would have learnt many prayers by heart. Although the *Hail Mary* and the *Our Father* would have been the most frequently said, it is noteworthy that Joan recites from memory lines from the *Hail Holy Queen*. The congruence between the language and her life experience is not, I would argue, coincidental. The image of *mourning and weeping in this valley of tears* poignantly encapsulates Joan's daily reality. The feminine imagery in the prayer speaks of her woman's experience of suffering. Flowing from the depths of her being, where the length and breadth of vulnerable divine love embraces her in her poverty, the prayer is a cry of hope from one who feels like a banished child of Eve. She implores to see the blessed fruit of the womb of Mary. In other words she is expressing an urgent desire for God that flows from God's desire for her. A care giver who is indifferent to

this prayer, or even worse skeptical, will miss a critical opportunity to support Joan in her suffering. On the other hand, a care giver sensitive to Joan's prayer will appreciate how the prayer expresses who Joan feels she is. It names her fragility and vulnerability, her sense of low self esteem, her absence of peace. The prayer gives expression to her relationship with God. It calms and soothes her. The prayer becomes a mantra that enfolds Joan in peace and enables her to know that in the depths of her being beyond all the confusion, in her *valley of tears*, her tears become one with the tears of the divine. Having recognised the significance of this self expression to Joan, in the ritual of going to bed, the care giver begins the prayer, encourages Joan to recite her prayers and

joins in her prayer. This time of being tucked into bed becomes a ritual, sacred time, where the prayer becomes a symbol of Joan's life. In this sacred time, revered by the attitude of the care giver, Joan feels calm, comfort and is able to gently fall asleep. Nourished by this way of expression, this sacred time, the time before bed now becomes a microcosm that feeds the macrocosm of a life lived in faithful love.

When Peter's shallow breathing is the only tangible reminder of the full generous life he lived, breath and touch are one of the few remaining symbols that can connect him to the divine. When Dan sits beside his Father holding his hand the touch comforts, consoles Peter. When Dan becomes conscious of his own breath breathing in union with the breath of his father, he connects with the breath of his father. A gentle smile on Peter's face suggests that their breathing is uniting him

with breath of the divine. Though grieving, Dan knows that *all shall be well* that his father is dying, but the last breath his father takes will unite him finally with the breath of eternal love.

Throughout his life, Fred always loved the Eucharist. Fortunately Fred belonged to a parish where people noticed his absence at Eucharist when the first signs of dementia set in. Members of the parish continued their relationship with Fred. They were committed to journeying with him through the final stages of his life and death. Aware of Fred's love of Eucharist, Norah continues to bring him communion. She continues to bring the sacrament even when he can no longer swallow, and all she can do is place the host in his hand. When Fred holds the host, Norah gains a sense that in some mysterious way Fred knows that this little piece of bread, Christ's body broken and shared, is his story. In holding Eucharist, isolation leaves Fred as he becomes more deeply one in the body of Christ. The truth of Christ's presence held in his hand unites Fred and all the sick and dying to the life death and resurrection of Christ. When Norah then consumes the bread for Fred, she has a profound sense of their oneness in Christ. This Eucharistic moment is a graced moment that gives expression to Christian hope. It anticipates a future determined not by human failure and limitations but by divine generosity. The palm of Fred's hand holds the one who died, rose and will come. Christ is present in the depths of Fred's experience filling him with radiant love.

Jacinta has little verbal language. Words are simply accompanying sounds to her body movements.

Frequently she sits and rocks in her chair moaning. Once a month Jacinta participates in a liturgy of the word prepared by the Chaplain of the nursing home. Sensitive to the variety of ways in which elderly people express and experience their relationship with God, the chaplain prepares the liturgy with careful attention to all the senses. Calming music, smells of crushed lavender, and colourful scarves and candles create a warm welcoming atmosphere. As each person joins the group the Chaplain greets them by holding their hands and making eye contact. Though Jacinta attended these rituals regularly the Chaplain did not notice any overt recognition of what was happening until one day when blessing each participants' hands with oil, Jacinta says in a clear loud voice "Amen." In this moment of lucidity Jacinta confirms her belief in the presence of God within the community and in the symbolic action of the Chaplain blessing hands. The symbolic action gives her access to the present moment of an instant of stillness. There is a look in her eyes that communicates a love more expressive and responsive than words could ever say. A few minutes later she returns to her rocking. But the rocking is calmer, gentler. Jacinta's care givers notice that after each ritual she seems happier, less confused and disorientated.

Though the stories I have told describe overtly religious symbols, there are a multitude of everyday symbols and rituals that can help people with dementia get in touch with their deepest memory of God. Symbols from nature (flowers, leaves, twigs, pets, sand and shells immediately come to mind). Knowledge of people's life experience before dementia can provide critical clues. As I was

writing this paper I began to wonder what symbol would help me get in touch with my deepest experience of God if I had dementia. I remember a story from childhood where I would snuggle under a daphne bush, smell the soothing aroma of the daphne, and feel at peace. Though I would not have been able to put language on the experience at the time I felt a sense that there is a grounding, loving, meaningful presence that holds all things in unity. Now I have many daphne bushes in the garden of my home. I feel sure that if someone brought me daphne when I could no longer express myself verbally that there would be a recognition at the deepest level of my being of relationship with God that has and continues to be the most beautiful aroma of my life. What would be a symbol that would enable you to get in touch with your felt presence of God?

## Conclusion

For a Christian who has lived life consciously in relationship with the divine, participating symbolically in the unfathomable depths of divine love drawing us to union, nurturing and strengthening this relationship, recognizing the first signs of dementia can engender paralyzing fear. The plea of the crucified Jesus remembering Psalm 22 becomes a likely response “My God my God why have you abandoned me?” (Mk 15:34). Feeling abandoned, confused, fragmented, desperate, we fear we will lose our memory of God. We don’t know if we will ever come to the place of acceptance and peace. We don’t know if we will ever be able to journey into this darkest night to dawn and experience the transformation that Psalm 22 describes.

Throughout this paper I have shown, that although the fear of being considered *nothing* can be real in a society that has lost its sense of the divinity of our humanity, ultimately, we are not abandoned when we are most vulnerable. There is at the depth of our being an irrevocable relationship of *oneing* with divine love that can never be destroyed. If people with dementia are accompanied by carers sensitive to their inherently symbolic nature this relationship of *oneing* can be nourished and enriched. When people with dementia are supported and encouraged to express glimpses of their relationship with God they experience a sense of deep connection, comfort, healing, joy and peace. People with dementia can feel and know: *You hear my prayer* (Ps 22: 24b<sup>3</sup>).

## Notes

1. All quotes are my translation of College, E. and Walsh, J. eds. (1978). *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*. 2 vols. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies.

2. For example, anthropologists such as Mircea Eliade have emphasised the symbolic nature of humanity present in all cultures. See, Eliade, M. (1969) *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Trans. Philip Mairet. New York: Sheed and Ward. Carl Jung, has described the archetypal nature of symbols that we all carry in our psyches Jung, C. (1968) *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Dell.

3. ICEL Version.

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