

The Naked Eye

Chained to Godspeak

BY MARK MATOUSEK

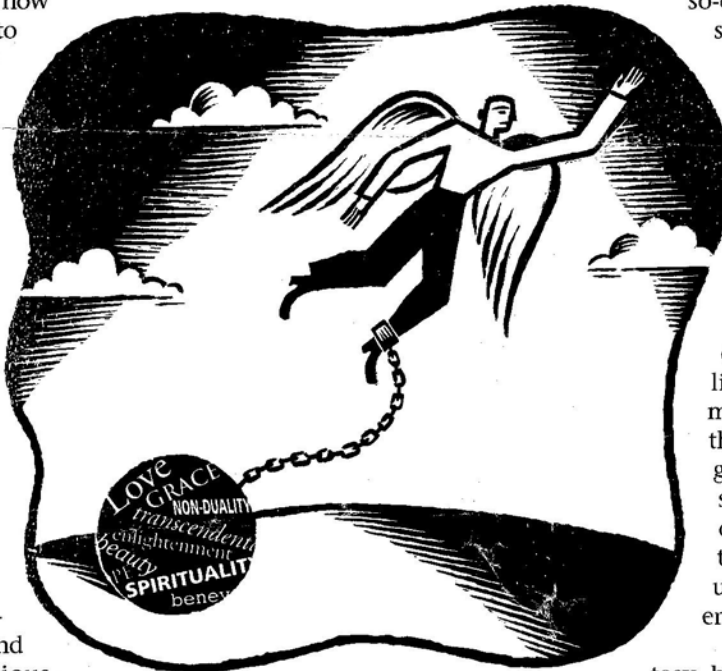
*True spirituality isn't something you talk about;
it's something you live.*

I've come to loathe the word "spirituality." After many years of working and living in the so-called spiritual community, and writing about the path for a living, I find myself painfully OD'd on sacred lingo and esoterica, terms such as "mystical," "enlightenment," "awakening." I'm weary of words grown clichéd through overexposure or cheapened through marketing; I'm saddened by how empty they now sound to my ear. Sussing out the root of this antipathy, I realize that my feelings center not on the words per se but rather on what they've come to symbolize, and what they hide. Here's a story to illustrate my point.

When my partner and I were first getting acquainted, I was doing my best one evening to explain to him who I was, what I cared about, and what I believed. For half an hour, over terrible spaghetti, I spoke to Louis about the perennial philosophy, nonduality, and the spectrum of consciousness. I described the seeker's passion that made my life worth living, and emphasized that as far as I was concerned, only the Big Questions mattered—life, death, and the quest for enlightenment. Louis, who'd survived 10 stultifying years at an orthodox yeshiva and emerged staunchly agnostic, asked me to explain specifically what I meant by enlightenment. I did my best, referring to the loftiest notions of No Self and liberation, citing examples of saints

who inspired me, reeling off transcendental terms as he listened patiently.

When I'd finally exhausted myself, I stopped and waited for his reply. For a long time he said nothing, overwhelmed by my fusillade of words, trying to digest the rhetoric. Finally he smiled and asked, "Do you mean kindness?"



I was dumbstruck at first, angry that he could reduce my glorious philosophy to one word, certain in that moment that this guy would never understand me, or anything. Louis watched me squirm like a butterfly stuck to the ground, flapping my wings, pinned down by simplicity. "Yeah," I admitted reluctantly. "I guess that's what I mean."

Having lived for the last four years with this infuriatingly sensible person, I've had my bluff called this

way a hundred times, forced to examine what was true and human and simple behind my writer's tendency to fantasize through language. In the process, I've grown quite skeptical, even cynical, not only about spiritual language but about much of what I'd come to think of as spiritual life. I question the terminology, and the turn of mind, used by many of us so-called seekers to help ourselves feel superior and special, sequestering ourselves in a spiritual elite whose very existence is antithetical to what an authentic path is all about. I'm painfully aware of the insidious ways in which spirituality, and all the magic it promises, can be misused as an escape or as decoration for lives we may feel are too mundane, too drearily just this, without the bows and glitter of the quest. Common sense demands that we ask ourselves: What is *not* spiritual, what is *not* fodder—if used skillfully—for enlightenment?

For me, the fall from fantasy has been painful, and has brought its share of bitterness. I remember the honeymoon days of my own conversion, when I was thrilled by the notion of transcendence, by the supermen and superwomen who'd attained liberated heights that an egomaniac like me could only gaze and sigh at. For a while, this worshipping of the holy, this infatuation with the idol of spirituality, was more satisfying, challenging,

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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and passionate than any relationship I'd ever had with a mere human being. I felt elevated by the spiritual stamp, the image of myself as a man on a path, and the intoxicating superiority of being a member of what I took to be the noblest club on earth.

When the honeymoon ended, though, my terminally jaundiced eye could not help turning to the inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and delusions apparent to me in this new field of dreams. A cynicism once limited to the dog-eat-dog material world now found evidence of falsity in the so-called holy landscape, where no well-known teacher seemed exempt from controversy (justified or not), where ersatz sacredness was being hawked for profit and recreation, where spirituality was a marketing tool for publishers, and where the plethora of New Age culture—much of it ridiculous—was at its zenith. This cynicism, which I would not deny in myself, was shared by many people around me, who wanted to leave the imaginary mystical fringe and rejoin the plain-speaking human race.

A friend of mine articulated this feeling well when he told me that spirituality was a lot like sex: The ones who really have it don't talk about it. If you've ever spent time with a bona fide master, you know that this is true. There is nothing more humbling, or disillusioning, than discussing spirituality in the presence of someone who lives it to an uncommon degree. I've had this experience several times, but never more bluntly than during an interview with the late Christian mystic known as Daskalos. At the age of 82, this great Cypriot healer had spent a lifetime engaging in what he called "exomatosis" (out-of-body travel), in addition to having access to precise information regarding past incarnations (verified by Egyptologists when he began speaking in ancient languages as a boy). His identification with himself as a body in time and space had long ago been annihilated, he told me; nothing was left of him but a vessel through which to manifest the workings of Joshua Em-

manuel (The Christ). Still, I was determined to engage Daskalos on the subject of mysticism in secular life, and for an hour I tried and failed to pull him through my paces, as he swatted my vulgar questions aside with jokes or ignored them completely. Finally, after I'd made one too many references to mysticism, Daskalos looked me in the eye and asked, "What do you know of these things? Only words you do not understand."

He wasn't being stern or dismissive, just accurate. Reflecting on this remark, and the truth of what I see in many so-called spiritual circles, I've learned that the use of mystical language (and other affectations) to sim-

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ulate, replace, or stanch up incomplete spiritual experience can be misleading, addictive, and dangerous. Describing enlightenment (like describing love) has almost nothing to do with its practice. Just as there are romantic con artists, so are there spiritual con artists in our midst who feed off the language of divinity for egotistical purposes, clothing themselves in rapture to cover what may be lacking underneath. I've known cruel and selfish people who were expert tacticians of mystical language. Such individuals have done themselves and others a great disservice—far greater than not speaking at all—by filling the air with fabulous language that shields their own hypocrisy and grossly misrepresents the simple, quiet reality of what the awakening individual actually experiences.

I long for a time when our infatuation with spirituality matures beyond its current kid-in-a-candy-store

phase, in which we wave godly things around like Tootsie Rolls. I look forward to a time when spirituality is returned to its rightful place in a sacred culture, as foundation rather than fireworks, background music instead of trumpets, where spirituality is present by implication and deed rather than by display. A character of Shakespeare's recommends speaking less of love than of the proofs of love—which reminds me of something an Indian woman said to me two decades ago. Lalitha and I were talking about relationships in the East and West, our distinct visions of romantic love. Although she had been married to a man she adored (and who adored her) for 30 years, she admitted to me that in all that time, through wedding, children, grandchildren, trouble, and reconciliation, she had never once told her husband that she loved him. As a highly verbal Californian, I was amazed at this and marked it off, at the time, to Oriental hokeyness and Lalitha's personal repression—until I asked her why this was so. "Because I would be too shy," she answered.

I remember this wonderful remark so often, and the wisdom I perceived behind it: that the subtlest and most fragile things lose themselves in gross words. I see now that there's even sacrilege in taking these innermost truths in vain, as the Hebrews know who hyphenate the name of G-d rather than defame it through speech. In most cultures, spiritual secrets have been spoken of little; their usage was earned through devotion, protected by teachers and ethical codes of restraint and secrecy. Though it's too late to expect a return to such circumspection—and while public access to spiritual wisdom has obvious advantages—we might do well to resurrect the essence of this ancient approach, and remember that reticence and extreme care are cornerstones of sacredness. The enthusiasm to talk about things we barely understand can threaten the very beauty, ineffable and mysterious, that we desire most.

Mark Matousek's memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment*, has just been released in paperback by Riverhead Books.