

LEAPING WITHOUT WORDS

*Cultivating and Exploring the Sacred
through Writing and Reading*

Christopher Dube



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*Leaping Without Words:
Cultivating and Exploring the Sacred through Writing and Reading*

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for

Endre Kovacs

who bears the silent river



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Preface

I was seventeen, maybe eighteen, when I stumbled across Malcolm Muggeridge's *Jesus Rediscovered* while rummaging for used books in downtown Harare's Treasure Trove. As soon as I started reading, I knew I was involved in a reading experience I had not encountered before. The author wrote with a sense of abandonment I found intriguing. There was no sense of hesitation, just the sheer beauty of intonation that allowed me as reader, to experience the wonder of written words and their use as a means of approaching a subject. I was hooked. I bought the book and wasted no time in reading and rereading it.

Muggeridge introduced me to a clue about the use of words—that wonder, beauty, magic, awe, can be had, can be hewn out of the ephemeral substance out of which words are made. I started to look for other evidences of this clue. I searched for other authors and books that displayed this quality by reading a few pages looking for clues of something I could not quite explain, though I knew just what it was.

During the intervening years I have discovered other authors that have a way of writing and accessing words I can describe as alchemical, spiritual, artistic, and creative. This book is a culmination of this process of searching. The research for the text was compiled during my postgraduate work at the University of South Africa and presented in a doctoral thesis titled *Spirit-Scribing: Textual Sensitivities of Writing and Reading Spirituality*. Since my

initial research of the subject, I have immersed myself in the world of publishing and have learnt a great deal about substantive editing and editing in general, something from which this book has greatly benefited. It has been a joy to finally complete what to me has seemed an impelling creative process.

Thank you: to Jan and Dr. Eugene Peterson for friendship and a timely gift that charted my path; to Professor Kobus Krüger, who along with Dr. Peterson supervised and oversaw my initial attempt at outlining the ineffable qualities of written words; to my family—Kitty, Jerome, Joel, for more than words; to the wider family—Merv and Mae Coles, my parents Jobe and Nelia, my brothers Percy, David, Prince, for wild laughter; to the encouragers—Wilson and Della Gray, Scott Gray, Ajay Caleb, Bruce and Karen McAndless-Davis, Sam Owusu, Maurice Tunti, Emmanuel Kapofu; to writers, artists, and publishers who have trusted me with their words—Christine Akiteng, Louis Charland, Mada Dalian, Dr. Jag Das, Dhyan Dewyea, Ron Garner, Connie Kellough, Dr. Lana Marconi, Afsaneh Nikkhoo, Nick Penkala, Debbie Riopel, Ross Seidel, Julia Star, Rob Tanner, Justin Thomas, Sam Tita, Ron Wypkema; to inspirers—Malcolm Muggeridge, Howard Thurman, Kahlil Gibran, Marguerite Porete, Hafiz, Thomas Merton, Jorge Luis Borges, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Ken Carey, WingMakers, Sam Keen, Paulo Coelho, Frederick Franck, Kevin Carroll.



Introduction

Words and Spirit

There are certain ways of writing, which when we encounter, we feel we are touching the edge of mystery. What is taking place in such writing? What is it about the words, words like any other, but whose cadence and dance on the page suggests the achievement of more than what is apparent? Can we cultivate such an approach to writing? What are the facets that support such an approach to writing? What about reading? Is there a way of reading that allows us participation in the source of inspiration with which the words are resonating?

This book explores these subjects and delves into the philosophy, and peculiar, intuitive approaches that result in the presence of spirit, of the sacred, the sublime, the holy, through the medium of written words.

As an indication of the overall approach, I am using the word *spirit* throughout the book to represent the contextual realm out of which all sense of reality and existence arises. With that sense, it has resonance with the understanding of *spirit* expressed

in the classical religions, for example, *Tao* in Taoism, *Holy Spirit* in Christianity, *Brahman* in Hinduism, *Ru'ah* in Judaism. It also resonates with the more contemporary presentation of Rudolf Otto's idea of *the Holy*¹, as well as with the non-dialectical understanding of *the Sacred*².

What is in view in all these terms is the central and unifying principle of all seen and unseen reality. My aim is not to argue for an interchangeability of the terms but rather to point toward a recognition of a *realm* of convergence to which each of these terms seem to be seeking reference. We may describe this region as the *divine realm*, but with the caveat that to do so is not to say God, or Yahweh, or Allah, or Brahman. It is rather to point to the congruous co-arising of reality, for that is exactly what the word *divine* represents, a source of origination.

Another illuminating understanding of *spirit* emanates from the diverse cultural and religious equations of the word 'spirit' with the idea of *breath* or *wind*. These equations are found in Judaism and Christianity, in Hinduism, in the cultural and religious traditions of sub-Saharan Africa, and also in the East Asian interpretation of breath as life force, *ch'i*. What these equations provide are a powerful visual image that is not only accessible and affective, but also invisible. That there was this settling on the understanding of *spirit* as breath is an indication that the image was able to capture the nuances and expressions that various cultural contexts were trying to communicate in what they understood to be spirit. These images of breath as spirit may also point to the universal and emotive impact of death in human society. Since a person who is dead no longer has breath and thus life, breath was equated to spirit, or the life-making, life-giving, and life-originating aspect of reality. In this sense, to say *spirit* is to recall something of this enlivening aspect of reality.

The way of approach to our understanding of the *spiritual* necessarily arises from our interpretation of *spirit*. With this brief

backdrop, we may define *spirituality* as the desire, hope, quest, act, art, or process . . . of making the realm of *spirit* (*the Holy, Tao, Holy Spirit, the Sacred* . . .) realizable.

There is a larger, overarching backdrop to this way of understanding spirituality. The realm of spirit assumed or experienced in the process of enacting the spiritual is of an *enticing absence* rather than a presence. The absence is enticing because there is an awareness that it is not an absolute absence, an abyss, but rather an absence that points to the possibility of an enlivening presence. The realizing or presencing of this intimating, enticing absence is what spirituality is after.

This means spirituality has a lot to do with mysticism, more pointedly, *apophatic* mysticism or mysticism of the *via negativa*. In many respects, we may speak of mysticism as the philosophical distillation of spirituality. That is, when spirituality is concerned with the ultimate ground of reality, it evolves into a concern with mysticism. To the same degree, when mysticism is concerned with the practical expression of what it apprehends of the ultimate, it transforms into spirituality.

My interpretation of spirituality is therefore cosmological and inclusive. The inclusiveness is not merely a chosen approach, but rather a quality that seems to be inherent in the process of the apprehension of the spiritual itself. Still, there is a sense of boundary in terms of what spirituality is after and not after.

For one, spirituality is not about each and every thing that touches the human psyche. Within whatever form of the enactment of the spiritual, genuine expressions of spirituality take place when the original frame of reference to *spirit* as the determinative ground is always held in view. Without this continual sense of reference, of reaching out to the originating source of reality, such expressions of spirituality degenerate into something small, grabbing, exclusive, and in that process, something quite other.

Science is one area that has begun to illumine how we may deepen and enrich our understanding of spirituality. Ever since the advent of quantum mechanics in the late 1800s and early 1900s, science has increasingly shown us that we live juxtaposed between what appears to be a vast system of interlocking relationships we call the universe, and an intricate system of emptiness which we used to call matter. The question we used to pose to the mystery of the universe ‘is there anything out *there*?’ is now being reflexively posed to matter—‘is there anything *here*?’ The answers have not been as predictable as we thought they would be. Mystery seems to be interwoven into everything we touch and experience.

Our overreliance on the solidity of the material is being overturned not only in science, but also in philosophy and religion. Philosophical terms like *postmodern* and *deconstruction* are variations of quantum physics and mechanics, while terms like *awakening* and *enlightenment* are their religious counterparts. We are finding ourselves unclothed in many arenas, but like our primordial parents, the usual reaction upon finding ourselves unclothed is to seek cover in whatever garb is available. Consequently, the unmasking of rational science through quantum physics is finding cover in mysticism; deconstruction, as much as it dislikes it, is finding that its answers lie in a form of structuralism; secularism (postmodernism) is finding that its answers lie not in religion *per sé*, but rather in spirituality.

What makes all of this interesting is not the idea of cyclical harmonization these movements seem to be pointing to, but rather the increasing awareness that harmonization does not have to entail a pendulum swing toward another opposition, that the cycling can be arrested and placed into a new orbit where new meanings and intrications of relationships reveal themselves. It is the search for a meaningful alternative, for the silent wisdom of the ‘third,’ between the clashing argument of ‘this’

against 'that.' This silent 'other,' after the clashing noises of opposition have abetted, offers the wisdom of the 'neither this nor that.' In the confounded silence that follows this resolution, the 'this' inevitably finds that it has all along been contained in the 'that,' and vice versa with the 'that.' Using the symbols of the yin and yang, the Tao comes to a rest when the yang recognizes that its being terminates in the yin, and the yin, that its being terminates in the yang. The circle of the Tao would spin endlessly without this intrinsic resolution of self within the other, and the other within the self.

This book represents an aspect of the expanding replacement of opposing cyclical movements into another orbit whose goal is toward whole-making. I have increasingly isolated the phrase 'textual spirituality' for the orbit that I am highlighting in the discussion. Spirituality, as I have outlined it, is not something you can package and hand over to another. It is evanescent. You can have a sense of what it entails, like the warmth of a breath upon the skin, but you cannot contain the breath. All you are left with is the sensation. The reality reveals itself through the sensation, and its description with the expression, 'it feels like this.'

Still, the breath of this book are words, more precisely, the writing and reading of words whose breath carry warmth and moisture in them. I have identified texts that are composed of such words as *spirituality texts*. Such texts do not necessarily equate with the description 'spiritual' or 'moral,' but rather with the sensuous presence of something, someone, breathing underneath the words. The goal of this exploration is to highlight how this textual quality can be pursued, expressed, and experienced. I have used the rubric of spirituality to show how the practice of textual spirituality may be expressed and cultivated because spirituality is most representative of what the process involves. At its very center, spirituality is concerned with whole-

making, becoming whole.

There are three fronts to the discussion of the book. They are complimentary and to some extent, mutually reifying. The initial approach has to do with the recognition of the philosophical and literary background of written texts that manage, for whatever combination of reasons, to become transmitters of the felt presence of what I have called spirit. In a sense, all texts have some form of presence. Still, what happens with what I have identified as spirituality texts is not merely a matter of emotive effect. The trajectories of the lines of meaning in such texts seem to intersect so that depth, mystery, holiness, the sacred, are brought into vibrant focus. It is not just a matter of aesthetics, of the beauty of form, but rather an intimation of an encounter with a living, breathing presence enticed and intimated by the word *spirit*.

When words or a text manages to arrest a moment in the flow of the outbreath that reality seems to be composed of, what we peer at, ever so fleetingly, is a suggestion of the silent hidden ground from which reality emanates. This is where words cease and silence speaks. This is the ground that inspires poets, mystics, and artists. A spirituality text, in that sense, can be a painting, a philosophical abstract, a poem, a sculpture, a melody. I have however, considered only one use of the term 'spirituality text,' namely, written texts that manage to transmit this sense of depth and presence. This approach provides focus to the discussion and also facilitates a basis upon which arguments for the literary exploration of spirituality can be organized.

The second approach to the subject is a logical continuation of the first and has to do with the literary consideration of spirituality texts within educational contexts. Because educational institutions thrive on specialization and fragmentation, within the academy, spirituality is sometimes considered an intruding non-discipline that does not want to play by the rules.

This is because spirituality calls for an inclusive and expansive vision. If we can clarify how spirituality understands and utilizes texts, much can become clear about the uniqueness of the study of spirituality—what it is after and how it approaches the educational enterprise. It is difficult to imagine education and academic study without the reading and writing of texts; texts will somehow always play a pivotal role in educational contexts, therefore underscoring the need for demarcating and identifying what spirituality texts are and entail.

The third approach to the book is demonstrative, not in terms of the ideal, but in terms of what a devoted attention to writing spirituality might look like, and concomitantly, what the reading of spirituality might evoke. A key part of the textual exploration of spirituality involves the creation of a bibliographical nexus of both texts and writers who show an ability, uncanny as it might seem, to display the textual sense of the presence of spirit. It is these kinds of writers and texts that should form the backdrop to the exploration and study of textual spirituality.

In addition to the writers highlighted as exemplars for the writing and reading of spirituality, there are three demonstrative approaches to writing spirituality presented in part two of the book. Each of the pieces is a textual tracing of spiritual presence utilizing the literary frameworks of the poetic, the narrative, and reflective or meditative, organized around the overall theme of mystical experience and awareness. The attempt is to demonstrate or offer examples of the arguments developed in part one of the book in terms of what a direct attempt to writing spirituality may look like as well as what impacts the reading of such deliberately written texts may have. But as this book makes abundantly clear, what is of spirit cannot be pinned down, it can only be garnered indirectly and in process.