THE ART OF HALLOWING

September 19, 1971

WHEN GOD WAS ALIVE

When God was alive
There was not a flower
But smelled of him,
Or tree but had his look,
Or bird but sang of him,
Or breeze but bore the touch of him,
Or berry his taste.

When God was alive
There was not a sage
But thought in him,
Or hero but had his strength,
Or lover but loved in him,
Or friend but bore the warmth of him,
Or saint his style.

When God was alive
There was not a need
But called on him,
Or grief but sought his joy,
Or vision but saw by him,
Or cause but found its end in him,
Or death its hope.

Now comes man of age
Smelling flowers,
Hailing heroes,
Touring moons;
In all ways sufficient,
Yet always reminiscent
Of something mourned.

(R. F. Shepard, Jr., 1967)

This little poem was written a few years ago to reflect the situation which the "death of God" writers were making us face up to. It is the feeling so widely attested that somehow the divine dimension has slipped out of our world, that God is either gone, or doesn't matter much even if he is still around. Some rejoice at this, multitudes are indifferent, but underneath there is a mourning.

But perhaps we are not content just to mourn the passing of God. I am trying to project now a series of sermons called FINDING THE LOST GOD. I undertake the project in the hope that we might make the discovery that Jacob made when he dreamed that remarkable dream on the barren hilltop.

"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it."

What I say today is by way of prelude. Later on I want to speak of finding God within ourselves and in human relationships and in the Word that becomes flesh. But today I want to speak of a kind of rock bottom attitude without which I fear we cannot get anywhere in this quest. I want to speak of a certain way of relating to things and to persons that I call hallowing. If you have ever read any of Martin Buber's writings, - for example, his I AND THOU - you will note that what I mean by hallowing has something in common with what he has to say.

But I do not believe that hallowing is an invention of Martin Buber or anyone else. It is something fundamental, I think, in human life. Whether I can communicate what I mean by hallowing, I do not know. It is not something that can be explained except in an oblique kind of way. The problem is not that we are dealing with some terribly intellectual notion. On the contrary, the problem is more likely to be that certain intellectual notions get in the way. Hallowing is something that children and simple people often do. But to say what they do is not simple. The only way you can say it at all is to make some sort of contact with other people's own experience of hallowing.

To hallow is to approach things in their sacredness. It is a way of relating worshipfully to the world around you. It is made up of that strange combination of intimacy and mystery that is the secret of all worship, that combination of wonder and affection with which the little child reaches out for a flower, or the astronaut gazes back at the shining earth.

Hallowing is a way of being present to the world with all of yourself, being present so as to let other things fully be themselves for you. It differs from consuming things, or studying them. It is not developing things, or shaping them or trying to make them into something else. Rather it is granting things the freedom to be what they are for you in their uniqueness. It is a way of beholding the world with reverence, with respect, with awe and yet with kinship. It is something that can happen with the simplest creature - a pebble, a leaf, or with another human being or with God. Indeed, it is only by hallowing that one can relate to God at all.

But let me give you an illustration. Let us suppose that on one of these days of early fall when the world seems to come more sharply into focus, you come upon a tree in an open field. Let it be an American elm - that variety of tree that lines so many streets hereabouts but which is now threatened by an incurable disease. Only imagine that this particular elm is one of those grand specimens that rise up wild from the river valleys of southern New England, a tree far taller and broader and much more by itself than any you might find planted on London Road. Let us consider four ways in which you might relate to this tree.

The first way is practical, or utilitarian. You put the tree to use. You hang a clothesline on it, or set up a picnic table in its shade. You might chop the tree down for lumber or for firewood. Using often means destroying.

People can be used too.

The second way you may relate to that tree is scientific. You approach the tree as an object of curiosity. You examine it as a specimen. You identify it by its botanical label, Ulmus americana. You study the tree, take its measurements, bore holes in its trunk to determine its age, examine its bark and leaves for signs of insect infestation. Perhaps you will try to get a picture of the tree's ecology, its relationship to soil and climate and other forms of life round about the tree.

This scientific way of relating to the tree may overlap with the practical, but there is a distinction. Science can be its own reward. It is said that there once was a society of mathematicians who opened every meeting with this toast:

> "To pure mathematics, and may it never be of any use to anybody."

But there can be something destructive in the scientific approach too. As the poet said, "we murder to dissect," (Wordsworth). The clinical attitude toward other people can be deadly. On the other hand, it is only through science that we shall find a way to cure the Dutch Elm Disease.

A third way of relating to the tree is aesthetic; you come to the tree with an artistic interest. Now you respond to the tree in its individuality as something with a beauty and meaning of its own that cannot be set down in scientific description. Perhaps you will paint a picture of the tree, or take a photograph, or write a poem about it, or sing a song. Or it may be that you simply look at the tree in such a way that as you behold it in its relation to field and sky and other items on the landscape, a satisfying pattern emerges. This is the aesthetic way.

But now we come to still one more way of relating to that tree. This final way does not necessarily exclude the other ways. Indeed, what I have called the aesthetic way merges into it, and the practical and scientific ways might well lead into it. But now in this hallowing way we no longer are concerned to use the tree, or to study it, or to put it into a picture. We just let the tree be what it is, to be what it is in the freedom of its own uniqueness. At the same time we try to be what we are. We come to the tree with reverence and respect and we make an affirmation toward it. We say "there you are, tree, and here am I, and I say 'yes' to you, and I find you saying 'yes' to me."

And thus we greet the tree and the tree greets us, not in conventional forms with how-do-you-do's and that hackneyed artifice called a smile, but silently within ourselves with an inward leap of joy. And in this our life is enriched. We are more than we were in this relation to the tree. Between us there is something holy, there is hallowing.

And now something more may appear. When we hallow the tree and the tree in its own way hallows us, then we find ourselves embraced by a larger Presence. Through our hallowing of the tree we enter into a hallowing of the whole universe. A magnificent harmony emerges

once we strike this one small note between the tree and ourselves. All of creation enters into that relationship - and beyond creation the One that holds it all together. By meeting the tree in this hallowing way, we meet God.

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Now, of course, hallowing is not limited to trees. With people too there may be a hallowing relation. People can be used. Our state governments now have what they call, "Departments of Human Resources." People can be studied. In large measure that is what our universities are about. People can become objects of artistic interpretation. Our museums and libraries are full of such. But people may be hallowed too and only when they are hallowed do people become people.

Hallowing is important for us people then. We cannot live as people in a world where trees and men are only used or examined. In that kind of world the image of God in us fades away to the barest outline. In order to be people we need to meet others in their sacredness, to greet them within the divine embrace.

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Therefore, there is no art so urgently needed as the art of hallowing. There is nothing inherently evil in using or studying, but when they are separated from hallowing their ways of relating can become evil. They reduce the world and everything in it to tools and specimens. And while the aesthetic way of relating does merge imperceptibly into the hallowing way, this too takes a tragic turn when hallowing is absent. The world becomes for us a series of picture postcards in which the picture is more important than the world. We become like tourists who are so busy snapping up every scene in sight with their high powered lenses, that they never get to see anything for themselves. They might just as well have ordered a box of colored slides from a travel bureau and stayed home.

So it is that if we are going to learn the art of hallowing, we need to pass through the discipline of putting aside those other ways of relating to the world. For example, we need to walk into the woods without a gun, a fishing-pole, a camera or even a destination. Have you ever done that? It's hard to do these days. It takes daring to do that, it is a kind of leap into the unknown. But we must try it. We must learn to go into the woods with just ourselves prepared to let whatever we meet there be itself without our constant manipulation. Without that discipline we cannot learn to hallow.

And so it is with people too. There are times when we must take the risk of being with people without using them, or studying them or painting their portrait.

If we can learn that freedom then the art of hallowing may be nurtured within us. It is an art requiring humility, wonder, faith and love. It places the heaviest demands on us. And yet the great wonder of our lives is that this hallowing event can happen so spontaneously. Suddenly a scraggly bit of desert shrub begins to burn and we find ourselves like Moses on holy ground. We lie down with Jacob in some God-forsaken wilderness and awake with the knowledge that this is the gate of heaven. Sudenly a gift is given; we see a little bit of the world the way God sees it.

And with that vision a task is given. It is the task of going forward from this mountain to other mountains with a hallowing spirit, until every mountain becomes for us BETHEL, the house of God.