

“*The Sacred Gaze* is more than just an insightful overview of the relationship between healing and spirituality: it is a splendid general introduction to contemplative prayer. Susan R. Pitchford understands that contemplation is, at heart, a revolutionary way of viewing life, love, and God. With humility and grace, she explains the beauty and power of contemplative seeing, and how praying in this way can help you to become the authentic person God has created you to be.”

— Carl McColman

Author of *Answering the Contemplative Call*
and *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*

“*The Sacred Gaze* invites the reader to consider devoting the time and energy to cultivating the contemplative life, not only for its own sake, but also for the way deep experiences of God’s unconditional love have the potential to bring a deeper level of healing to a wounded or spoiled identity. To experience oneself as beloved of God, expressed either through a mutual gazing in love upon one another in imaginative contemplation or as held in God’s embrace in imageless prayer for long periods of time over a lifetime, leads to the discovery of one’s true self that relieves one of the burden of all ego projects. To look into the mirror who is Christ is to discover one’s own Christic identity.”

— Dr. Janet Ruffing, RSM

Yale Divinity School
New Haven, Connecticut

The Sacred Gaze

Contemplation
and the Healing of the Self

Susan R. Pitchford

Foreword by
Alan Jones



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For Edie Burkhalter, who gives me permission
to be who I am.

And for Judith Gillette, a one woman oasis.

With all my love and gratitude.

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Foreword



There's a *New Yorker* cartoon of a flashing sign on the highway which reads, "Welcome to Las Vegas: A faith-based community." There's no way of getting away from "faith"—a set of assumptions by which we approach and interpret life. How do we live in a world "addicted to velocity"? How do we resist the seductions of a culture that invites us to define ourselves by what we consume? Susan Pitchford has written a fiercely honest and probing "guide for the perplexed" which brings together sharp psychological insights with the ancient wisdom of the Christian spiritual tradition.

We live in an age in which there is no time for reflection, no time for catching up, no time for deepening, no time for wonder and amazement, no time for gathering up the scattered and mislaid bits and pieces which we call our life. On reading this remarkable book, I thought of Frederick Buechner's novel *Godric* in which he writes of the saint trying to recover those parts of himself he'd flung ahead of himself and of the parts he'd left behind.

The open secret of the spiritual life is that *contemplation* is at the center of a true understanding of humanity. Someone once defined contemplation as "a long loving look at the real." And that takes time. Contemplation isn't a one-way street. We not only contemplate but are the object of contemplation. We are gazed upon with love.

When I studied for the priesthood in an Anglican monastery, there was a painting of the crucifixion in the crypt chapel with the famous verse of John 3.16 (“God so love the world . . .”) in Latin: “*Sic Deus dilexit mundum . . .*” which we translated as “God so *delighted* in the world . . .” I remember the prior leading us in a meditation inviting us to imagine God *delighting* in us. In fact, life (and especially the life of prayer) was the participation in the circle of delight—God delighting in us and us delighting in God and one another and the world.

Archbishop Rowan Williams writes, “As I see it, contemplation is the centre for our understanding of what the new humanity is. That is a humanity that is unconditionally receptive to God, unconditionally receptive to grace, and therefore profoundly open to what God is giving. Willing to live with the darkness and risk that that sometimes entails, conscious all the time of being anchored in the Son’s contemplation of the Father, and the eternal mystery of the Trinity.”

Susan Pitchford has outlined for us a great anthropological adventure, echoing Nicholas Berdyaev’s famous phrase, “Man without God is no longer man” (forgive the non-inclusive language)—an adventure to heal the distorted and damaged sense of self. Something our world and our culture sorely needs. Pitchford writes, “Sometimes, when I am talking with a student about course work or their dreams and anxieties about the future, I’m struck by their completely unself-conscious radiance.” That’s it. This book is about the recovery of radiance—the sheer wonder and amazement of being alive and aware.

Alan Jones
Dean Emeritus
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco

Preface



If we desire to ascend to God, we must descend into our own humanity. The “descent” into himself or herself is not a preoccupation with the self and its concerns but the desire for God.

—Ilia Delio¹

This book was born, as so many things are, out of a seeming coincidence. In my introductory sociology course I acquaint students new to the field with the characteristic ways in which sociologists think about social issues. We then spend the quarter practicing this way of thinking on a series of questions: Does the American education system promote equality of opportunity or hinder it? Why do some people embrace religions that seem bizarre to others? Why do some countries remain mired in poverty while others move forward? What factors create violent conflict between groups, and what are some steps they can take toward reconciliation?

These are interesting questions, but it occurred to me that my representation of the field to my students was skewed toward the “macro” or large-scale interaction end of the spectrum. Sociologists are also interested in interactions between individuals and small groups, so I started revising my course and added a new “micro” unit, one that would focus on self and identity. How do we become the people we are? What factors influence

the content and meaning of our identities? Sociology tells us that the “self” is constructed through our interactions with others, whose responses mirror back to us the people we are. Of course, many sociologists, especially the theists among us, would argue that there is a core or essential self. Believing sociologists, like me, would say that the self is created and given by God. But all of us are interested, not only in the ways the self is shaped by society, but also in the ways we present ourselves to others.

While I was considering these things, I happened to be reading Ilia Delio’s *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love*. This excellent book includes a fascinating chapter called “Image and Identity,” which raises some of the same questions I’d been thinking about for my course. Two things occurred to me: first, maybe someone was trying to tell me something, and second, maybe what I was being told was that as a Christian, a Franciscan who loves Saint Clare, and a sociologist, I might be able to pull together insights from all of these sources to say something useful about self and identity.

There were two other reasons to consider taking on this project. One was that in my last book, *God in the Dark: Suffering and Desire in the Spiritual Life*, I had begun to talk about how greatly God desires to transform us, even transfigure us, so that we may be, as St. Peter suggested, “partakers of the divine nature.”² I tried there to make the case that the darkest and driest times of life move us toward sharing in the glory of Christ, but I felt there was room to develop this idea further. The other, and probably the most compelling, reason came from my own experience. I once spoke to a group of fellow Franciscans about some hard times I’d been through years ago, and during the question-and-answer period afterward, someone asked me, “How did you heal after those experiences? How does a person come back from that?” I was taken off guard, and I remember shrugging and saying, “Time—and a lot of personal attention from Jesus.”

I'm enough of a sociologist to know how dangerous it is to generalize from my own experience, which is why I've been careful in this book to say that God deals with each of us differently. But remembering the exchange in that session made me think that perhaps someone else could benefit from what I'd learned about personal healing. Like so many people, I have struggled with a battered sense of self, but I have learned from Teresa of Avila and others that a lot of good can come from spending time with Christ and "just looking at him."

So in this book, my goal is to draw some living water from three different sources: sociology, spirituality, and personal experience. The sociology in this book is hardly new, and it's not difficult to grasp. These are the kinds of basic ideas I share with college students, many of whom are three months away from high school. Yet there is some real insight there, particularly in Erving Goffman's famous dramaturgical perspective, which sees people as actors and looks at how we perform our selves for others. I'm also struck by how the early sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's idea of the "looking-glass self" (we learn who we are when our image is reflected back to us by others) ties into Clare of Assisi's advice to gaze into the mirror of the crucified Christ and there discover who we are. We cannot see ourselves without a mirror, but once we've found the One who can reflect our image back to us in both perfect truth and infinite love, I believe that gazing into that mirror holds the promise of healing.

As for my own experiences, they are offered for what they're worth. As Helen Keller is reputed to have said, "I am only one, but I am one." I am only one woman, and my experience will not be exactly like yours. God is not nearly as predictable as that. But I can tell you this: when I gaze into the mirror of Christ, what I see there is radically different from the self I thought I knew. To witness your own transfiguration, and to hear yourself called "Beloved," is a powerful thing. I am not suggesting in this book that contemplation alone can cure everything; if you've

got a physical or mental illness, get the treatment you need. But I do believe that, although “gazing” will mean different things to different people (and we’ll explore some of those differences as we go), what I am calling the “sacred gaze” is a potent source of healing. I invite you to explore it with me and ask the God who loves you, even more than you desire, to show you who you really are. I’m pretty sure the radiance you see reflected in that mirror will send you into a hard squint.

One final note, on the subject of language. Once again I am frustrated by the lack of gender-neutral pronouns in English, and by the way the alternatives grate on the ear. I just can’t get used to repeating “God” several times in the course of a sentence (“God revealed Godself to God’s people”). So while I’ve tried to mix it up occasionally, in general I’ve gone with masculine pronouns, not because God is more masculine than feminine, but because by virtue of being traditional, they seem to call less attention to themselves. I realize, however, that not everyone hears them this way, so my apologies to those who don’t. One has to choose, but please feel free to mentally substitute the pronouns you prefer. Neither God nor I will mind.

Acknowledgments



It's said that fiction writers write the books they want to read. Perhaps nonfiction writers write the books they need to read; at least it seems I do. Once when I was about to get on a very long flight with a very bad back, I was grumbling to God about how it hurt, and why did I always have back flare-ups the day of travel, and where was he, and why wasn't he doing anything about it? And the still, small voice within me whispered, "Aren't you the author of *God in the Dark*?" The gentle reminder that I'd written a book on the presence of God in human suffering made me laugh, and we got across the Atlantic together on good terms.

In the present book I'm once again looking for answers to the most urgent questions in my own life, namely, who am I, and is God okay with that? Can I be? I don't think I'd have had the courage to write this book without the support of some of the wisest and dearest people in my life. First, Edie Burkhalter, TSSE, and Judith Gillette, TSSE, are sisters in the Third Order, Society of Saint Francis and continual reminders of how blessed I am to be part of that community. They both read the manuscript as I worked on it, and they both assured me that I wasn't the only one screwed up enough to need to read it. I'm deeply grateful also to Lev Raphael, whose friendship is a joy and whose generosity with the knowledge and experience gained from a long and prolific writing career is a Godsend. Teresa DiBiase, Obl. OSB,

is another dear friend whose fingerprints are on this work. She read a draft when I was stuck and asked me one simple question that helped me find my way again. I'm indebted as well to Daniel Burkhalter, who though much younger than I is wise beyond my years and has taught me so much without obviously trying.

I also want to thank the two spiritual directors I've had during the course of this project: The Rev. Kathryn Ballinger and Laura Swan, OSB, both of whom have been like orienting stars in what is sometimes a pretty dark sky.

Once again my agent Kathleen Davis Niendorff has seen a project through from conception to completion. Without her generous help and kind encouragement all this stuff would just be an endless loop in my own head. I am also indebted again to the team at Liturgical Press: Hans Christoffersen, Lauren L. Murphy, and all the others have spent a lot of time and patience on me, and I hope the final product is worthy of their trust.

Finally, my own family deserve my deepest thanks, as they have dealt with me the longest and put up with the most. Nancy, Lynn, and Kim Pitchford; Bob Crutchfield; Danielle and Tally White: what would I be without you? You have given me so much joy.

Chapter 1



Radiant and Fully Alive

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness. . . . I have the immense joy of being . . . a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

—Thomas Merton¹

Sometimes, when I am talking with a student about coursework or their dreams and anxieties about the future, I'm struck by their completely unself-conscious radiance. They are so young, so caught up in the pleasures and dramas and novelty of adulthood that they don't see what glorious beings they are, so full of potential, each one a whole world unto herself. But every now and then, I see. It's like witnessing a transfiguration, a vision of the human that lifts the veil and shows the divine image

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beneath. Saint Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, said that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” My young students are not yet fully alive, perhaps, but they have the wonder of human life within them. It dazzles me, and I lose my train of thought.

But Merton was right: there is no way of telling people that they’re shining like the sun. I can only imagine their response if I tried to share the view of them that I’ve been graced to see. When the moment has passed, and I’m left alone with the impression still in my mind, I’ve wondered: What might someone, visited with the same graced vision, see in me? Is there a radiance in me too, if I could only see it?

It takes a considerable leap of faith for me to take this possibility seriously. Pride, as we know, is the deadliest of deadly sins, the one that fuels all the rest. But pride comes in two flavors: There are people whose pride takes the form of thinking excessively well of themselves. I’ve never really been one of them, though I can be pretty full of myself at times. The alternative is to become completely self-absorbed in continuous rumination on one’s inadequacies, and that is much more my style. Shining like the sun? As Eliza says in *Pygmalion*: “Not bloody likely.”

Yet growing older does have its consolations, the chief of which is growing up. If I woke up tomorrow and found myself twenty years old again, I’d find the nearest sharp object and kill myself with it. In the last decade or so, God has been working hard on my sense of self, replacing the wavy mirror in which I saw a distorted reflection with one that is straight and true. The image is radically changed: at first, I could see the odd sparkly bit, but in time I’ve come to see my own transfiguration take place. This is no flight of fancy; as St. Paul tells us, “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit.”²

The key, I believe, is the *gaze*. God greatly desires to take our distorted sense of self—whether we value ourselves too little or

too much—and restore to us our true identity. But this requires sustained, attentive looking into the mirror of God’s providing. Many translations of St. Paul’s text add that we are seeing the glory of the Lord *in a mirror*. Elsewhere, Paul says that we see “in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.”³ The face he means, of course, is God’s own. Until that fullness comes, and we know as intimately as we are known, we see partially, in a mirror. But as we do, we are being transformed into the image and glory of Christ: a human being fully realized, fully alive.

The spiritual life is full of paradoxes, and one of them is that to see ourselves clearly, we need to look not toward ourselves but away. If we try to look directly at ourselves, we’ll just look down at our own feet and fixate on how they’re made of clay. A mirror gives us a truer image, and when Christ himself is our mirror, the reflection we’ll see there can effect powerful healing of the self. But we must invest real time and energy gazing at it; there is no shortcut to this type of healing.

Why is God so committed to this healing, to helping us see ourselves as we really are? Because you can’t approach God with a mask on. You’re going to have to face him truthfully or not at all. And really, “not at all” is not an option, at least in the long run. Being “fully alive” means living authentically, not hiding from the truth about ourselves. God desires to turn back the tragedy of Eden, to make us naked and unashamed. But as the Christ-figure Aslan says in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, “This may be more difficult than you think.” It’s difficult because each of us has built up a false self, which we not only project to others but believe in wholeheartedly ourselves. In Thomas Merton’s words:

My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves. . . . All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own

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egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered.⁴

No one escapes from developing a false self, and our language about the self reflects this. The very word *person* is from the Latin *per sonare*, “to sound through.” The idea is of a mask, through which an actor speaks.⁵

In his classic work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,⁶ the sociologist Erving Goffman developed a theory of social interaction based on the metaphor of drama. Goffman examined the ways people perform their identity to audiences consisting of the others with whom they interact. Careful attention to costume, props, and how we deliver our lines are all meant to control how others see us; in Goffman’s terms, the presentation of self is for the purpose of “impression management.” It’s not hard to see that this carefully staged self is likely to be more false than true, as our performances are geared to achieving our own objectives rather than God’s. The false self is a persona we come to live in; we inhabit it like a house that gives us an artificial sense of safety, but it’s built on sand and its structure is fundamentally unsound. Jesus warned that when the wind and rain come, houses built on lies will fall down and crush us.⁷

This is why he’s so committed to dismantling our false self and restoring our true one. As the letter to the Ephesians puts it: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”⁸ We not only are supposed to have a new self, but that self is supposed to be in “the likeness of God,” righteous and holy, shining like the sun.

People often speak of “salvation” or “conversion” as if it were just a kind of “get out of jail free” card, an exemption from damnation. But God is not playing Monopoly; God is not playing at all. The Revelation given to John at Patmos makes it clear that

nothing that loves and practices falsehood can be admitted to the presence of God.⁹ Only what is true can stand in the presence of Truth. The truth of Jesus' identity was revealed to his closest friends in his transfiguration: "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."¹⁰ Jesus didn't become someone different in that moment; the disciples simply saw the reality that had always been there. We are in a process of becoming Christlike, of being "transformed into the same image"; we are not there yet. But God, who lives in eternity, doesn't have to wait to see how we'll turn out. When God looks at us, he can see us transfigured, changed "from glory to glory." And if, through prayer, we are willing to enter that eternal reality with him, we can see this too.

What difference does it make? On a practical level, what changes when we come to see ourselves more and more as God sees us? I can't tell you exactly what difference that will make to you. But if I could go back fifteen years and tell my younger self what I've learned from this process, there are six lessons I'd pass on to the anxious, thirty-something me:

First, that thing you've done? God doesn't hate you for it. Second, those things that were done to you? God doesn't despise you for them. Guilt and shame do not have to come between you and God, or you and yourself.

Third, this is supposed to be a relationship. Cultivate it. This will take time, and there will be costs. Pay them. It's worth it.

Fourth, God desires to be in this relationship with you more than you can imagine or believe. You will just have to take that on faith. Fifth, if you could see yourself as God does, you'd do whatever it takes to grow into that identity. And you'd begin to see why it was worth it to him to suffer and die to restore and reclaim you.

Finally, you have a lot to learn about who God is too. The false images you've held of God are closely linked to the false images you've carried of yourself. They're both destructive. Lose them.

In practical terms, the most striking fruit of this process in my life has been peace—that deep, abiding peace that Jesus promised, which remains even during disappointment, failure, and grief. I no longer despair about the things in myself I cannot change, including my mortality. Having been on a flight that seemed to be going down over Dublin, with the two stout Irishmen in my row wetting themselves in fear, I can say with some assurance that I’m not afraid to die. At least, I wasn’t that time. (My prayer on that occasion was, “Lord, I’d really like to see my family again. But in any case, I’d like to not see my lunch again.”) I don’t relish the prospect of losing others I’m close to, but I don’t “grieve as others do who have no hope.”¹¹ And I’ve seen that the more I live with the definition of myself that I’ve learned from God, the more I’m able to resist definitions imposed by others. This truer self is like a shield I can use to fend off attacks of negativity, both from without and within.

Don’t misunderstand me: I remain as capable as ever of monumental blunders and daily screw-ups, and I’m still prone to fits of self-doubt and surges of ego. I haven’t become any more organized or any more capable of feats of asceticism, large or small. I remain addicted to chocolate, and I still spend more on myself than a Franciscan probably should. But what I’ve learned from daily gazing into the mirror of Christ is that I don’t have to wait till I’ve overcome all these things to be God’s beloved. That is the reality right now, as surely as Jesus was divine before he dragged Peter, James, and John up the Mount of Transfiguration. That event didn’t change Jesus. It just showed the disciples the truth of who he’d been all along, and that changed *them*. I am convinced that gazing into the mirror of Christ will change us too.

This book is a short course on how to see that you are in fact shining like the sun. I can tell you that you are, but only Christ can *show* you that you are. As the great Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila said to her sisters, “I’m not asking you to do anything more than *look at him*.”¹² She knew, and I know, that he will take care of the rest.