

Mystics and Poetry: Doorways to the Spiritual Path

A Class in 2021 for the Laity

The Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor ptaylor@thediocese.net

Mondays at 4:00 p.m., Tuesdays at 1:00 p.m., or Thursdays at 1:00 p.m. (choose best time for you)
8 weekly sessions beginning on January 25/26/28

To register, email Anita Lisk alisk@thediocese.net with your name, the name of your parish, and your 1st & 2nd preference of day/time no later than January 22. You can also email Bishop Taylor ptaylor@thediocese.net with questions or suggestions.

We live a time of disorientation. There's Covid-19 as well as the continuing turmoil from the election. In addition, Church isn't what it has been for most of our lives. As I thought about this reality, I recalled the story "Rip Van Winkle." If you remember, Rip fell asleep and slept through the transition from his country being a British colony to being an independent nation. He awakes but cannot locate himself. In despair, he cries out:

"‘God knows,’ exclaimed he, at his wit's end; ‘I'm not myself - I'm somebody else - that's me yonder - no - that's somebody else got into my shoes - I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and every thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!’”

We too feel displaced. Everything is changed. At times we don't recognize our old lives. I don't diminish the effects nor the scope of such displacement. They are real and consequential. However, in times of turmoil, we must remember who we, why we are here, and what we are called to do.

As I pondered how to help members of the Diocese of Virginia to engage in this task of remembering and reorienting, I realized that it is necessary to engage in several ways of learning to "equip the saints for the work of ministry." My intent is to engage both sides of the brain by looking at the core writings of several spiritual teachers as well as a broad exposure to mystical poetry. In times of confusion, we need reorientation. We need a different metaphor or way of mapping our world.

The mystics will enable us to go deeper in our connection to God by describing their spiritual path. In essence, they will offer different maps to approach the holy. This is not meant to be an academic exercise. The point is not to learn about John of the Cross; the point is to learn from John of the Cross so that we can discover how his journey through the Dark Night of the Soul can inform the journey we are on in 2021. Thus, our method is always appropriation – translating a person's experience into our context. In 2021 how do we negotiate our own Interior Castle or Dark Night of the Soul? How can the saints who gone before give us a map for here and now? The mystics we will encounter include St. Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Simone Weil, John of the Cross, Howard Thurman, Thomas Merton, and others.

By reading poets who also explore the mystical/spiritual path, we will ensure that we engage our right side of the brain. St. Paul wrote that the Spirit speaks to us "with sighs too deep for words,"

which is why we need poetry. The poets are in an anthology – Lovers of God Everywhere, edited by Roger Housden – and include Claude McKay, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Robert Hayden, Jean Toomer, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Mary Oliver.