



## Surfing and Spirituality

Nothing is more important than our journey to God, or "the spiritual life," as many writers call it. For this is our ultimate reason for living. It's what each of us was born for.

Nearly all who write about the spiritual life distinguish stages in it. For it's clearly like a road on which we move, and change, and progress.

Many different images from physical life have been used for the stages of the spiritual life, for example, Teresa of Avila's "mansions" (in *The Interior Castle*), or Walter Hilton's rungs on *The Ladder of Perfection*. Since these are just *analogies*, differences between them are not really contradictions. The same reality (the stages in the spiritual life) can be truly told by using many different metaphors, or symbols from physical life.

One analogy that's never, as far as I know, been used—yet one that is quite arresting to many souls—is the analogy of surfing.

Many of us love the ocean. It's our favorite place in the world. As soon as we have the vacation time and money, we spend it there. We feel a mysterious longing for the sea as some kind of secret to our own identity, as if our blood had salt water in it. (It does, by the way.) This longing is a commonplace of poets:

I must go down to the sea again  
To the lonely sea and the sky  
And all I ask is a tall ship  
And a star to steer her by.

John Maesfield

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll;  
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain!

Lord Byron

We nonpoets feel it too. If we didn't, we wouldn't read and love the poets.

I'm not an expert swimmer, but I *am* a swimmer. I'm not a good surfer, not even a "real" surfer with a full-sized board. But surfing with a boogie board, or body-board—well, that *is* my "thing." It's not only one of the most delightful experiences I know but also one of the most profoundly suggestive. I know only a little about the spiritual life, much more from others than from myself. But what I know well (surfing) is a powerful teacher, by analogy, of what I don't know well (the spiritual life). That's the purpose of analogies: to use the better-known to better know the unknown. I here share my favorite analogy because I suspect many readers will reply, "*What! You too? I thought I was the only one!*"

The key elements in the symbolism are pretty clear: I, the surfer, am—myself. The body with which I surf in the sea symbolizes the soul, with which I "surf" in God. The sea is God. The beach is the approach to God. Surfing is the experience of God, or the spiritual life.

In my surfing experience I can distinguish twelve steps. In my experience of God I can also distinguish twelve steps. The twelve clear, physical steps in surfing help clarify the twelve more mysterious steps in the journey into God.

There are four main divisions, with three subdivisions in each.

The first three steps are preliminaries. The first step is the *knowledge* of the sea. No one will ever experience the sea without *going* there, and no one will go there without *wanting* to, and no one will want to without *knowing about* it. Thus, the first three steps are: (1) knowing about the sea; (2) wanting to go there; and (3) going there.

Parallel to these three necessary preliminaries for surfing are the three necessary preliminaries to God. They are the three "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and love.

First, we must know that God exists, and is good, and is our joy. That knowledge comes by faith. (It can also come by reason for some, but it comes by faith for all.)

Second, we must hope for God and seek him. "Seek and you shall find" implies that if you don't seek, you won't find.

Third, love (charity, *agape*) is the fruit of this plant of hope, whose roots are faith. For Christians, love means a life, not a feeling. As Kierkegaard puts it, love is "the works of love." Faith blossoms into works. Faith works. The plant—roots, stem and fruit—is one. Faith, hope, and love—works are not three things but three parts of one living thing: the spiritual life, the life of God in the soul. This is "the one thing needful" (Lk 10:42).

Faith in God is our knowledge of God. This is like our knowledge of the sea. Hope in God is our desire for God. This is like our desire to go to the sea. Love of God is our actual movement and growth toward God, or in God. This is like our actual travel to the sea.

All three are delightful. Planning a vacation is almost half the fun. Foreplay is as much a part of love as consummation.

Our knowledge of the sea need not be deep, like the sea, for it to be sufficient as the first step in our journey. We needn't be oceanographers to be vacationers. Similarly, we needn't be theologians to be saints.

But our *desire* for the sea must be deep if we are to take the time and money to travel there. Mild curiosity isn't enough. Most of us have to move a lot of schedules, people, and suitcases to take a vacation. We won't do it without longing.

The next three stages in our journey to the sea happen only when we are already there, in its "presence": (4) seeing the sea; (5) smelling the sea; and (6) running down the beach into the sea.

The gift of understanding is like sight. No amount of words or verbal explanations can substitute for seeing. You only *believe* the truth of the words in a travel folder. But you see the sea when you arrive there, and that sight strikes a chord in the heart, a chord of joy and homecoming—and at the same time of further longing. It's a mysterious mingling of deep satisfaction and

dissatisfaction, a divine discontent. For the restless heart that God has made for himself is not only restless until it *gets* to God; it's restless until it rests *in* God.

The faith-hope-love pattern is repeated here. Seeing the sea is the fulfillment of the faith-from-afar that we had from travel folders. And seeing God is the fulfillment of faith: "If you believe, you will see" (Jn 11:40). Smelling the sea is the fulfillment of desiring hope from afar. Smelling is a most mystical sense. The thing itself enters into us, or we into it, when its very molecules enter our noses. And smells move us more deeply and mysteriously, sometimes, than any other sense. Finally, running into the sea is like self-forgetful, self-offering love. It's an obligation, an offering of self.

The next three stages deepen our relationship with the sea and with God. First (7), we get our toes wet. Spiritually, we experience a little of what we have first believed and then understood.

Second (8), we get wet halfway up. Getting your bathing suit wet is the essential step. Bathing suits cover our private parts, our tenderest spots. This symbolizes the hopeful investment of our lives that is pain, sacrifice, and death. The starkest difference between the saints and ourselves is their willingness, even eagerness, to suffer for God.

Finally (9), getting wet all over symbolizes the total consecration of our whole self, whole will, and whole life to God, leaving absolutely nothing left for ourselves, not a penny or a second or any other thing we call our own.

The last three stages cover what is usually called "mystical experience." Getting in over your head (10), with your feet no longer on the ground, symbolizes the mind plunging into the divine mysteries, the "dark night of the soul" that no words can mediate. We lose all footing. We are no longer in control. We're a part of the sea, it seems. Thus, even the orthodox mystics say pantheistic-sounding things, for they see and feel only God, not themselves at all. Of course, they're still *there*—who's having the mystical experience, anyway? But they don't know or feel themselves there any more. They're in over their heads. This sounds scary only as heaven sounds scary. For it *is* heaven, the beginning or foretaste of heaven. All of us will be mystics there.

Then comes the actual surfing (11). Let's make it body surfing. Body surfing is an even more intimate oneness with the sea than board surfing, whether with a full-sized board or small bodyboard. Here, our unity with the sea is greater than the passive getting in over your head (10); it is the active doing what the sea does. What the sea does is waving. So we wave. We become one with what the sea *does* as well as one with what the sea *is*.

Steps 1-9 were all dynamic process, motion. Step ten was the end, peace. But that's *not* the end. On the other side of the end there is more dynamism and movement, but this time *from* the end rather than *to* it, from within it, as waves come from within the sea. After we are moved *to* God, we find that once we are in God we are moved again, this time *from* God, *by* God. God is dynamic, like crashing surf, not static, like a stagnant pool. Living in God forever is the most dynamic, exciting thing there is. Body surfing is (for surfing freaks like me) a remote but intimate analogy, a weak yet powerful foretaste of heaven.

Finally, the analogy breaks down, as all do. The last physical stage (12) is not joyful, but the spiritual stage it symbolizes is supreme joy. The last stage is drowning (something I would *not* advise!). It symbolizes mystical union, death not just of concepts (stage 10) or of self-will (stage 11, when we're moved wholly by the sea's waves) but of the very ego-self itself. Something in us

longs to die, for only death brings resurrection. Something in us that we cannot understand, something we both fear and love, cries out to God to slay us in the Spirit:

Blow, blow, blow till I be  
But the breath of the Spirit,  
blowing in me.  
And, "I live, nevertheless not I, but Christ lives in me."