

TO LOVE OUT OF EMPTINESS

A Service by Hope Colt & Fritz Hudson

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STORY FOR ALL AGES - Hope Colt

Today is a day of great celebration. Today is a day when we think about the heroes in our lives that we see every day but we may not ALWAYS think of these people as heroes we may not always think to say thank you to them for everything they do to save the world just for us. Who do you think I'm talking about? Mothers! That is right, Mothers. Right now think about your Mother or maybe you have two mothers to think about.

Think about the things your mother has done to help you. Close your eyes and think about what your Mother does for you every day. What kinds of things do you see your Moms doing in your mind? Do you always say thank you for what your Mothers do? I know I didn't always say thank you to my mother. That's okay we can all say it right now together and if we say it really loud I promise where ever your Mothers are they will hear you! On the count of 3 let's say thanks Mom! 1-2-3

How do you get to be a mother? Some people who are mothers grow their babies inside their tummies and some people who are mothers adopt their babies and children. It's a wonderful thing: there are almost as many ways to be a mother, and kinds of mothers as there are mother? here today.

In fact some people who are mothers don't even have any children at all and I am so happy to get to tell you about one such mother today: She was named Agnes and she lived in the country of Albania.

But she dreamed about traveling and helping people ever since she was a little girl the ages you are right now. Another word for helping people is the word Mothering.

When Agnes was 18 years old she decided she would devote her whole life to helping people and she became a catholic Nun. In the catholic religion there are groups of women who live and work together. Most of them don't have children of their own so that they can spend their time helping people. When you thought of all the things that your Mom does to help you I wonder if you thought about how much time all of those things take to do. Catholic nuns make a vow to not build their own families so that they can have more time to help other families.

When Agnes became a Nun she changed her name to Teresa, she picked that name because of St. Teresa a nun from long ago who helped poor people. Agnes liked Saint Teresa very much and wanted to be like her. Agnes who was now called sister Teresa went to the country of India. A part of India that had many poor people: Calcutta India. She could have decided to stay in the convent where she and the other nuns taught school but Sister Teresa couldn't stop thinking

about all the people in the streets of Calcutta who didn't have food, or proper clothes, who were sick and some had no homes to go to. So even though she was just one tiny woman her dream to help was big.

She left and went into the streets. She helped feed the people and she helped them find a way to take a bath and clean their clothes she helped them eat maybe the only food they would have for days. She did things that mothers do for children. Some of the people she helped were children but some were very old people. Soon other Nuns asked if they could join and help her and they began to call her Mother Teresa. They called themselves the Sisters of Charity. One night Mother Teresa was walking the streets looking for someone who might need her help. She saw an old man sitting next to a little old shack that was his little home.

He looked thin and hungry she handed him some bread and beans to eat. He took them and ate but he didn't look at her. He didn't speak and his eyes were so sad. Think of the saddest eyes you have seen his eyes were 10x more sad. He looked like no one cared about him at all.

Mother Teresa asked if she could go inside and see his home. He nodded yes. His little house was so dark she had to use a candle to see. When she lit the candle she saw: It was so dirty it looked like it had not been cleaned in 20 years. Can you imagine if your house wasn't cleaned in 20 years!

Some people would run away from so much dirt and so much sadness as that man seemed to have, but Mother Teresa asked the man:

"Can I clean your home sir?" He looked at her puzzled "why?" he asked.

"My wife is dead my children are gone, no one comes here. Let it be." He said

"Please allow me, I don't want to clean your home for anyone but you. Sir, please, it may make you feel better."

He nodded yes and ate the bread and beans?

Hours and hours passed as the old man sat in the street outside while Mother Teresa cleaned his house and as she cleaned she whistled and sang songs. She was so happy.

In the back corner of the house she found a beautiful oil lamp. It was covered in dirt and grease but she could see the beauty beneath. She cleaned it up and took it to the old man.

"Sir," she said "you have a beautiful oil lamp here, it looks as though you haven't lit it in 20 years. If I put oil in your lamp will you light it?"

"No" said the man "No one comes here, there is nothing to see in the light let it be?"

Mother Teresa looked at the old man sitting in the street. She said, "Sir, if you let me put oil in your lamp, I'll promise to have one of the sisters come to see you each night and you will have someone to see." And when she said that the old man looked at her not with the far away sad look that he looked with before but he looked at her and smiled.

Why do you think he smiled? Mother Teresa had helped the old man eat food yes and have a clean house yes. And even have light in his house. But what are all of those things if no one cares for you if you have no one to talk to and to smile with?

Mother Teresa did not let the sadness and loneliness be. Two years later she was away helping other people and she received a note from the old man: "The light that you lit in my heart shines on 'till today: Thank You Mother!"

Mother Teresa wanted to help the poor people not because they were hungry or dirty or sick. A lot of people who are not poor think that that is all that poor people need. But Mother Teresa knew that the worst kind of poverty, the worst part about being poor is being lonely and forgotten. When people pass by and don't see the person that is inside you that's when you really feel poor, no matter how little or how much money you have.

Mothers take care of our bodies by working to buy us food and by making sure we are healthy but the most important part of what Mothers do is to take care of our hearts by loving us.

Mother Teresa and your mothers do just that. The most wonderful news in this story is that every time you help someone by being their friend when you think they are lonely you are saying "Thanks Mom!" To your mother and all mothers forever!

SERMON - Fritz Hudson

As one of us, among us, she's been gone more than ten years now. Her image, however, is still clear in the memory of many:

- the small, thin, stooped lady, roman-nosed, beneath the blue bordered sari;
- the sandals over bare feet, adorned only by a crucifix, a girdle, a rosary
(exactly as she had described her proposed "habit" to Archbishop Perier of Kolkata, half a century earlier);
- and the smile, always the smile.

She'd been born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, ten years into the last century. Her home was Skopje, presently capital of the Republic of Macedonia. By the time she made her entrance on the world stage, however, just past our last mid-century, she'd long since become Mother, Mother Teresa.

And now she's "the Blessed" Mother Teresa. On the first anniversary of her death, September 5, 1998, a young mother (Monica Besra) in the village of Dangram (450 miles northeast of Kolkata) was in great pain. She'd been to her doctors. They'd discovered a lump in her abdomen and they'd begun treatment. The pain, though, was still intense. On that anniversary day, Monica took a locket holding Mother Teresa's picture. She placed it over the pain. Perhaps, she saw "a beam of light" pass through the picture. She definitely felt the pain go away. The doctors' medical records, which might establish when, even how, the lump subsided, are no longer open to public scrutiny. Four years later, however, the Vatican accepted this "cure" as the miracle required for Mother Teresa's beatification – to become "The Blessed" Mother. They await the second miracle – the one that would make her a true "saint."

It had occurred to Mother Teresa, herself, to wonder, some years before, if she ever might qualify for sainthood. What she wrote to her spiritual confessor, then however, was this: "If I ever become a saint, I will surely be one of darkness. I will continually be absent from heaven – to light the light of those in darkness on earth." (March, 1962, p.230). In fact she'd written him the year before: "Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. The place of God in my soul is blank – There is no God in me. . . . Heaven – souls – why these are just words – which mean nothing to me. My very life seems so contradictory." (April 1961, p.210) (Come Be My Light. Mother Teresa. edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk. M.C. 2007)

Albert Camus would have appreciated this contradiction. The Plague is perhaps Camus' greatest philosophical novel. Near its end the traveler Jean Tarrou says to Doctor Rieux, "Can one, without God, be a saint? That's the problem, in fact the only problem, of which I am still aware?" (Part IV, p.255). I'm wondering, on this Mother's Day, whether this Mother, Teresa, may well be on her way, perhaps even on our way, to answering Tarrou's question.

Of course it took some time for this apparent contradiction to come to light in Mother Teresa. It took years first within herself, and now even more years to those of us who've viewed her only from an out-side. What has brought it to us, now, finally, has been the publication last year of the book Come Be My Light. Come Be My Light is an edited record of Mother's letters and notes, written or entrusted to her priestly confessors and superiors over her lifetime. It's been compiled, with commentary, by Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk. He is a member of Mother Teresa's priestly order, the Missionaries of Charity Fathers. He's also the official "postulator", advocate, for the "Cause of Beatification and Canonization of Mother Teresa of Calcutta." Is it disrespectful to call him "spin-doctor-in-chief" in this campaign? I can't think so. His position is not obscured. Equally unobscure, however, is his "candidate's" own words. And both expressions – his and hers - can speak to us on their own terms.

The young Gonxha, applying at age 18 for admission to the Loreto Sisters, expressed herself to be a most willing servant. From Skopje, she wrote the Mother Superior in Ireland "I don't have

any special conditions, I only want to be in missions, and for everything else I surrender myself completely to the good God's disposal." (June 1928, p.15)

Three years later, in India, making her first vows, Gonxha could write a friend, "If you could know how happy I am, as Jesus' little spouse . . . I am enjoying my complete happiness, even when I suffer something for my beloved Spouse." (May 1931, p.18)

As she grew into her maturity as a teacher in the Loreto convent schools, Mother Teresa's sense of inner intimacy with her "spouse" deepened. "Before crosses used to frighten me – I used to get goose bumps at the thought of suffering – but now I embrace suffering even before it actually comes, and like this Jesus and I are in love." (February 1937, p.20) This embrace began to extend physically, personally, beyond her convent's walls. "Every Sunday I visit the poor in Calcutta's slums. I cannot help them . . . but I go to give them joy. Last time about twenty little ones were eagerly expecting their "Ma." When they saw me, they ran to meet me, even skipping on one foot. . . . "Oh God, how easily I make them happy!" (October 1937, p.27)

Mother Teresa would say - Father Kolodiejchuk would say – that the formative experience of her life came on September 10, 1946, on a train from her work in Kolkata to her annual retreat in the mountains at Darjeeling. It felt like her "call within a call." Its voice called her "My own spouse." Over the next nine months, it said

- "Come, come carry me into the holes of the poor.
- "I want Indian nuns, victims of my love . . . who would be . . . united with me . . . covered with poverty of the cross."
- "Dress in simple Indian clothes or rather like My Mother dressed."
- "Do not fear – I shall be with you always."
- "Come, be My light."
- "Wilt thou refuse?" (January 1947, pp.44-52)

Father Kolodiejchuk feels it "highly probable" that Mother Teresa experienced the mystical state of ecstasy in that time, the state of union with God.(p.83) That may well be. To my reading of her soul's journey, however, the real direction-setting point came four years earlier. In her "spiritual maturity," Mother and her confessor agreed then that she could "make a vow to God, binding under mortal sin." The vow was "to give to God anything He may ask, 'Not to refuse Him anything.'(p.28). To bind herself thus, in her faith's understanding, meant that she would risk eternal damnation should the vow ever go unfulfilled. Beneath that, in the Albanian culture of her upbringing, it echoed as a *besa*, a word of honor. She herself once explained that a *besa*, "means if you have killed my father and the police are after you, and if I have given you my word, then even if the police kill me, still I will not disclose your name." (January 1983 p.31) "Wilt thou refuse?" the call "into the holes of the poor," her voice asked, in Mother Teresa's later ecstasy. She could not refuse it then. She had given her *besa*. More importantly, she could not ever again refuse it, even after years and years of abandonment as a "little spouse" - even in the

darkness, the emptiness she would later feel in the place of that union – even unto death. Once given, she lived her *besa*, forevermore.

From this beginning has grown the world-wide work of the Missionaries of Charity. Its members now number well over 5,000, its missions over 600, in 120 countries. Mother Teresa, its model in life, was celebrated as Nobel Peace Laureate, a Gallup poll's most admired person of the 20th century. Accolades attract skeptical inquiry. In the British medical journal, The Lancet, in 1994, a physician (Robin Fox) who'd visited the Kolkata Mission's Home for the Dying criticized the hygienic procedures and pain management used. (Mary Loudon. British Medical Journal. Jan.6.2002 pp.64-65).

Free Inquiry magazine has published a former Sister of Charity's critique of the missionaries' management of all the money that pours into its coffers virtually unsolicited. "The donations rolled in and were deposited in the bank. They had no effect on our ascetic lives and very little effect on the lives of the poor we were trying to help. (Susan Shields.

http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/shields_18_1.html)

In the course of considering Mother Theresa's beatification, the Vatican interviewed writer Christopher Hitchens. In one book, and several articles, Hitchens' condemnation boils down to this: "Mother Teresa was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend of *poverty*." (Christopher Hitchens. "Mommie Dearest." Slate.com. Oct.20, 2003). Her commitment to share poverty with the poor, he charges, did far too little to rescue them from it.

I see the truth and the tragedy in these critiques. I am unable to mount much indignation from them, however. I wonder how we could expect more from a person whose love for the poor is but a reflection of her love for Jesus. Is Teresa any more than the woman recalled in Matthew's gospel who came to Jesus in the house of Simon the leper? She had an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment, you remember? She poured it on his head. His disciples, indignant, said, "Why this waste? This ointment might have been sold for a large sum and give to the poor." But Jesus said "Why do you trouble this woman?" The poor you shall always have with you, but you will not always have me." (Mt.26:7ff).

Indeed, we now know, Mother Teresa herself did not always have Jesus, in spite of his voice's promise "I will always be with you." What she had always was the vow she had made to him, never to refuse him. And what he'd asked of her, when she'd had him, was to "be my fire of love amongst the very poor – the sick, the dying, the little street children." Her calling was to a ministry of presence, and ministry of care. It was not to a ministry of cure. In this world almost all others cannot stand the sight, the smell of poverty. After a minute, or a month, or a mid-course correction – we turn away, run away from the poor, if we can. Her call was simply to live in open relationship with the poor's pain. I cannot dismiss her because she did not, perhaps could not, cure it.

Indeed Christopher Hitchens' indictment is really a bit of a boomerang. "In the gradual manufacture of an illusion, (he says) the conjuror is only the instrument of the audience. . . .

Mother Teresa's shining reputation has indeed been foisted upon her by the millions who need to feel that someone, somewhere, is doing the things that they are not to help the poor. (The Missionary Position, 1996). Perhaps all Mother Teresa's sainthood should be judged by whether she managed somehow to keep us mindful of what we, who could do more, are not doing.

There's more in it than this, however, to me. Knowing now of her estrangement from God draws me closer to Sister Teresa. I'm attracted by the indirect path she found left to her for sanctification. To her confessor, she wrote, "The Sisters in front of my very eyes I see them love God – come so close to Him – grow daily so much like Him – and I, Father, am just "alone" – empty – excluded – just not wanted. (October 1961. p.222) "Since God wants me to abstain from the joy of the riches of spiritual life – I am giving my whole heart and soul to helping my Sisters to make full use of it." (February 1962. p.227)

Camus, some many years ago, led me to an only somewhat different path. In The Plague, after many months working side by side ministering to the sick, Jean Tarrou and Dr. Rieux find themselves one evening urged to take in the view from a patient's rooftop terrace. There overlooking the City of Oran, Camus' Mediterranean home, Tarrou says

- "Rieux, do you realize that you've never tried to find out anything about me – the man I am. Can I regard you as a friend?

- Yes, of course, we are friends; only so far we haven't had much time to show it."

- "Good. That gives me confidence. Suppose we take an hour off – for friendship.

Tarrou then proceeds to tell Rieux of his confrontation as a child with his father's work as an attorney, a Prosecutor. In his late teens, he watches his father, at work in court one day, advocating for the death of a criminal. He suddenly realizes, that throughout his life, when his father has set the alarm to get out early in the morning, it has been to witness the execution of another he's prosecuted. He feels complicit. He has to leave home.

"As time went on, however, I merely learned that even those who were better than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others kill, . . . We can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing someone to death." Does this resonate for you, in our complicity with soldier and civilians deaths in Iraq, or species deaths in global warming, or gang-style deaths in urban poverty? "All I maintain," Tarrou concludes, "is that on this earth there pestilences and there are victims., and it's up to us, so far as possible not to join forces with the pestilences. . . . I've no great ambitions."

But then Tarrou adds. "I grant we should add a third category: that of true healers. . . . One does not come across many of them . . . That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victim's side. . . . Among them I can at least try to discover how one attains to the third category: in other words, to peace."

That's the preamble, when Tarrou says, "It comes to this. What interests me is learning how to become a saint.

When Rieux says, "But you don't believe in God," Tarrou then responds, "Exactly. Can one become a saint without God."

In Kolkata, a certain Prabir Ghosh is head of the Science and Rationalist Association of India. He has deflated the claims of many of India's holy men. He believes Mother Theresa's supposed miracle should be similarly scrutinized. I have no complaint, he says, 'if she is declared a saint for all the great work she has done among poor people. . . . It is indeed an insult to Mother Theresa to make her sainthood dependent on some stupid miracles."

I agree. In fact, I take the insult somewhat personally.

I now count Sister Teresa with me a student, though perhaps unaware, of the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tse:

We join spokes into a wheel

but it is the center hole that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot

but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,

but it is the inner space that makes it livable. (Tao Te Ching)

Doctor Rieux says: "Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me," "What interests me is being a man."

Tarrou says, "We're both after the same thing. I'm (just) less ambitious."