

If the brain is the location of the “mental”, logical and rational, and the heart is the center of the sensitive, feeling and loving, what is the GUT? Gut feel, Gut instinct, Gut response, Gut reaction - all of these saying refer to the intuitive side of our selves. The belly or gut is not limited by language or thought, or captive to emotion either positive (love) or negative (fear). What we feel in our gut wells up out of our subconscious. It is our gut that provides us a better truth, a deeper knowing. When the chips are down and you have to make a decision, when all the thinking and feeling about a problem does not provide a clear answer, what do you do? You trust your gut.

Does it not make sense then, that the gut can provide us with a better truth, a deeper knowing of God? And this brings us to our third Christmas saint, John, beloved by Jesus and Author of the Gospel. (*From the Prologue of John*): 1  
*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

You can diagram those sentences, you can research the Greek term LOGOS which we translate as Word, you can understand this as the first step in the development of the theology of the trinity, but this does not define God. The poetry of the Prologue offers us another avenue to know God – thru the creative, intuitive, mystical approach to God.

My guess is that every one of us has had an experience of God. Sometimes this happens when we have hit rock bottom, when we are in despair, when even the possibility of hope is gone. Sometimes this happens when we observe the natural world and see God's hand activating it. Sometimes it happens when we experience the creative process either as the artist or by reaction to art. We are going to look at examples of all these.

For years, Diane Rehm hosted a daily talk show from American University's WAMU that was syndicated on NPR. On Thanksgiving Day she would rebroadcast her favorite shows, one of which was her interview with Albert Sample, otherwise known as Racehoss. Sample was the Texan son of a black, alcoholic prostitute and a wealthy white man, who at 6 was managing his momma's tricks, at 12 was hopping freight trains and crossing the country, and at 21 was in prison. Most of Racehoss's 17 prison years were spent picking cotton in an all-black Texas prison

known as the “burnin’ hell”. It was while in solitary confinement he experienced God first hand, and it changed his life. A God experience really is from God if it changes your life to your very core. Mr. Sample was the first ex-convict in Texas to work out of the Office of the Governor, to serve as a probation officer, and to serve on the staff of the State Bar of Texas. He was the recipient of numerous humanitarian awards before he died in 2005. A remarkable life for a man born a bastard to a prostitute. You can read his description of God’s revelation to him during the next silent session in the handout.

The point is, God still does touch some of us directly. Both St. Paul and Racehoss experienced the same touch from God. You might want to call to mind the last time you felt God’s touch, albeit a lighter touch. Have your actions continued to reflect the joy you felt then? The joy you want to share?

Not only does God show up unexpectedly, sometimes we recognize the existence of God in the observation of the world around us. Such was the case for Brother Lawrence. “The Practice of the Presence of God” is a collection of 15 short letters and a few conversations, and has been in continuous print since the early 1700’s. Brother Lawrence had been a footman and then French soldier when in his 18<sup>th</sup> winter, he saw a bare tree, realized that the tree would shortly

sprout leaves, then flowers, and then fruit. In his gut, he KNEW the life-giving power of GOD and that revelation detached him from the world and sparked in him a love for God which completely absorbed him. Brother Lawrence entered the Carmelites as a lay brother (the menial, worker class in the monastery, rather than the upper, educated class). His low status and lack of education should have left him an anonymous monk, and yet eventually he was sought out as a spiritual director by the rich and famous of the time. Why? Because his love of God was remarkable AND his approach to God was available to everyone, in every walk of life. Here's what he recommended:

"That we should establish (in ) ourselves ... a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him. That is was a shameful thing to quit His conversation to think of trifles... "

"That GOING to God consists in ... the renunciation of everything which ... does not lead to God." (This is the lesson of the parable of the rich nobleman in the gospel).

"That our Sanctification did not depend upon CHANGING our works, but in doing ... for God's sake (what) we commonly do for our own."

"That (Br. Lawrence) was pleased when he could take up a straw from the ground for the love of God, seeking Him only, and nothing else, not even His gifts."

You can see why Br. Lawrence has remained popular these 300 plus years. He recommends nothing you could NOT put into practice today.

"The Practice of the Presence of God" is one of two spiritual books that I would take with me on a desert island. And my story of how I discovered this little gem is another reason I believe in the communion of saints. About 30 some years ago, before I had ever heard about Brother Lawrence, I was on a silent retreat with a bunch of strangers. On the second day of the retreat, browsing the monastery library shelves, I pulled a book from the shelves and sat down to read. The book turned out to be a re-telling of the story of Brother Lawrence set in contemporary times. I hadn't read 10 pages when a woman dropped a pamphlet into my lap with a note that said "This has made all the difference in the world to me", and walked on. That pamphlet was "The Practice of the Presence of God", and she was right.

Now you can tell me that it was coincidental that I pulled that particular book off the shelf, that this particular woman happened to be in the library at the

same time that I was, that she happened to have the pamphlet with her, and that she happened to know I had just begun to read a book derived from the classic Brother Lawrence book, and that the “The Practice of the Presence of God” was exactly what I needed at that very moment. But I don’t believe ANY of that was coincidence, and neither, I bet, do you.

If we give God a little room, by shutting off the chattering monkey in our brains and the churning emotions in our hearts, He will, eventually, show up in our lives. WHY WOULD HE NOT, HE LOVES US! God might show up as a dormant tree, as he did for Brother Lawrence, or as a pamphlet, as happened to me in that monastery library. Your job is to be open, to be ready, and to be aware.

Back to St. John: do you think his life was easy? He’s the only apostle who stood at the foot of the cross with the women and watched Jesus die. Legend has it that he was forced into exile and died on the Aegean island of Patmos, far from his home and the Christian community. John was a man whose personal life screams failure: The loss of his friend, Jesus, the loss of being in the mainstream of the Christian Community. And yet out of this life of hardship comes the poetry of the Gospel of John and Revelations.

Do you know why I agreed to give this Advent address? The answer is entirely selfish. Because writing is hard. Because I'm terrified that I will fail. Because I throw out 10 times as many words as I keep. Because it takes me roughly 40 hours of writing to create 30 minutes that I hope is worth your time. But those are 40 hours that I will spend, struggling with the word of God. Those are 40 difficult hours, and God NEVER fails to show up and surprise me.

So how do you challenge yourself and put yourself in a position to meet God on the gut, intuitive, miraculous level? My recommendation is to try doing something difficult, with a high probability of failure. I don't know anyone who ran into God while watching television. Just saying....

What have you ever wanted to DO that has the possibility of failure? Failure is SO underrated. Jesus died on the cross, a failure. Thomas went to India and was martyred. Stephen was stoned for being a bad Jew. John was disgraced and sent into exile. And yet, failure is what lets us grow, to see ourselves as we truly are, lets us see ourselves as God sees us, and loves us.

I fail magnificently and regularly in two pursuits – in AKC competitive dog obedience and as a painter. Since 2005 I have been trying to achieve the highest level of American Kennel Club obedience achievement. I'm now working with my

third dog, Dan'l, having failed with two prior dogs. And yet Hank and Nate have been fabulous spiritual directors, because they have shown me SO many flaws in my character. Dogs can't lie, and pretty much when they fail, they do so because you have failed them. That's a pretty good source for character development.

And I fail regularly as a painter. To be truthful, I look at the successes I have had, as happy, random accidents! So why do I do it when it is SO frustrating? This is what Brother David Vryhof of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, has to say about Imagination: "Allow the Spirit to touch you through your imagination and reveal to you the truths that lie beyond your rational mind, in the hidden depths of your soul." The creative process isn't just about succeeding, it is about the process. It is about being vulnerable, cracking open a little bit so God can shine light into those dark corners.

The great thing about art is that it can reach you as either as the artist or as the observer. Architectural forms create sacred spaces, poets string together words that pierce deeply into our hidden secrets, and music reaches into our chest and rips our heart open. We've all experienced some version of this.

However, Art doesn't work properly with a drive by or a skim. You need to spend time with it – whether it is the written word or a painting. Instead, pretend

you are on a date. Take your time, sit, look, listen. If you haven't been to the Cummer recently, give yourself a Christmas present and go ALONE. Pick a painting or sculpture to sit with. How does it make you feel? What does it make you think about? And finally, where is GOD in that piece?

Or find a poem to sit with. Read it line by line, or word by word. Leave it and then come back to it again. What do you feel, what thoughts does it trigger? Day dream with it. You get the idea.

IF you are really adventuresome, try creating something yourself. I can't speak for other artists; I can only speak for myself. My best work happens only when I can get out of my head and work from my gut. To quote Yoda from StarWars ""Do. Or do not. There is no try." So you do, and you do not over think, and you do not judge. You approach art with the freedom of a child. Then you put your work away for several days, and come back to it. You'll find things that will surprise you. You'll even find some truth and beauty in the failures. AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO SHOW IT TO ANYONE!!!! (That's the best part!!) You are free to fail!

You can fail at work, or fail at a hobby, or fail as an artist. You can be born a refugee, or born a crime, or born a bastard. You can be a head person, a heart

person or a gut person. You can be any of these things or all of these things. God has many mansions and each of those mansions has a door. You can open one door, or you can open as many doors as you want. All YOU have to do is be willing to reach out and turn the handle. May your 2019 be filled with many newly opened doors!