



Alive
NOW

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Mystery & Meaning



Editor's Note

One damp night in the north Georgia mountains, my brother and I abandoned our sputtering campfire and went wading through the river. We'd been sitting awhile on a rock in the river in the rain when he asked, "You know the thing about fish?"

"No, Dave. What's the thing about fish?"

"Here's the thing about fish." Deep breath. Dramatic pause. A twinkle in his eye. "The *fish . . . are in . . . the river.*" It felt like a Monty Python moment, but apparently he wasn't kidding.

"Ah," I said. And it dawned on me: indeed, the *fish . . . are in . . . the river.*

I can try to paraphrase that. I can say, "Transcendent Reality . . . is immanent within . . . the flow of finite creation." Which doesn't really say it. Or more simply: "Mystery . . . is hidden . . . here." Better, but I still need the fish and the river, the rain, the rocky edge between darkness and water,

and my grinning, grounded, wise-guy brother, who never goes fishing just to catch a fish.

Maybe this is how it usually goes as we experience and express the central mysteries of being alive, *imago dei* in a world suffused with beauty, suffering, and holiness. There are mysteries, and ultimate Mystery, and we want to understand it all far more than we ever will. What both opens and limits our understanding is the way we understand imaginatively. Embodied in images, mystery has shape, color, radiance, heft, rhythm, fragrance, movement, melody. But we can't subtract the image to find the revelation. The two are inseparable. So imagination and language are alive with metaphors, all of them conceivably a kind of prayer, a longing to behold and understand rightly the mystery we can't really name any other way.

The writers and artists in this issue explore that movement from the experience of being

touched by holy mystery to the expression of that experience. They center their attention on the image or metaphor that serves as a threshold from ordinary to extraordinary. This gate of heaven is everywhere, all the time, in sound and in silence, both concealing and revealing the mystery of God's presence.

It may be helpful to explain that the articles are arranged in light of how these images work upon us. Section 1 portrays that threshold moment in which a powerful image strikes us and invites response. Section 2 invites us to explore the first level of engagement, in which A represents B, and we more or less "get it." But as all the writers in this section suggest, there's more to the story. In Section 3, we find ourselves drawn into deep water by contemplation of a numinous image. In over our heads, we realize that our heads are only one part of how we know. We realize there's more here than we *thought*.

Section 4 explores the disorientation caused by the Holy Spirit alive in a numinous image. We struggle to consent to God's work in our minds and imaginations as we revision faithful living. But, like stars, even the most illuminating images can burn out. In Section 5, we look at the faith, courage, and receptivity of the spiritual imagination as God gives challenging new metaphors to explore the mystery of holy presence.

Prayerful engagement with images is a spiritual discipline. Whether those images are from Scripture, tradition, experience, or dreams, they can unveil meaning like phrases from a new language. Except that this language, as we learn it, translates us.

The fish are in the river. Thanks be to God in the name of Christ, the ultimate embodiment of divine Mystery.

Laura Huff Hileman
Guest Editor