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— Elizabeth Johnson-Miller, author of *Rain When You Want Rain* and *Fierce This Falling*

“Charles Murphy’s examination of Emily Dickinson’s poetry in the Christian mystical tradition adds another layer to the growing corpus of serious treatments of her work as so much more than simply private lyric verse. In brief compass and with great care, Murphy enlarges our sense of the possibilities that Dickinson’s genius lays before us. No one who reads this book will ever think quite the same again about her poetry.”

— Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University, author of *The Wounded Angel: Fiction and the Religious Imagination*

“Charles Murphy’s book weaves together an amazing range of sources: literary and theological, mystical and personal anecdote. It explicates Emily Dickinson’s poetry with delight and sensitivity and raises the reader’s awareness of her spiritual aspirations and fragile beauty of soul. It is an exploration of poetry and prayer that will be valued by all those who are drawn to either or both.”

— Marie Noonan Sabin, author of *Evolving Humanity and Biblical Wisdom*

“Margery Kempe’s autobiography was lost for 400 years. Thomas Traherne’s meditations were rescued from a trash heap after the author’s death. This book now demonstrates, more than 130 years after Emily Dickinson’s death, how we’re only beginning to see her poems for what they were.”

— Jon M. Sweeney, editor of *A Course in Desert Spirituality* by Thomas Merton

Wild nights - Wild nights -
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Faith - the winds -
To a heart in boat -
Come with the Compass -
Come with the Chart -!

Ringing in Eden -
Ah! the Sea!
Night - ' but - moon -
To-night -
In thee!

MYSTICAL PRAYER

The Poetic Example of Emily Dickinson

Charles M. Murphy



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Portions of this book were written in Rome, where I was the guest of the Pontifical North American College. I wish to express my thanks to the rector, faculty, and seminarians for their hospitality.

I dedicate this book to my two nieces, devoted physicians Karen Di Pasquale, DO, and Erin Dawson-Chalat, MD.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Reintroducing Emily Dickinson 9

ONE PRAYING MYSTICALLY:
"I dwell in Possibility" 19

CONDITIONS FOR MYSTICAL PRAYER

TWO SOLITUDE:
"The Soul selects her own Society" 35

THREE ASCETICISM:
"The Banquet of Abstemiousness" 47

FOUR PLACE:
"I see - New Englandly" 57

WHAT BRINGS US TO PRAYER

FIVE THE DESIRE FOR LOVE:
"I cannot live with You" 75

8 *Mystical Prayer*

SIX THE FEAR OF DEATH:
"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" 89

CONCLUSION: "My business is Circumference" 99

NOTES 119

INTRODUCTION: Reintroducing Emily Dickinson

In 1830, in the small college town of Amherst, Massachusetts, remote in the Connecticut River valley, was born Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, who is regarded as one of the greatest—if not the greatest—American poet. Living virtually all her life in the Homestead, her father's elaborate house on Main Street, she wrote nearly two thousand poems, which she never intended for publication and which were discovered in a bureau drawer after her death. The Homestead, which was the town's first brick building, was where she, her mother and father, and her younger sister Lavinia lived until their deaths, assisted by Irish immigrant help. Having become more and more reclusive over the years, she died in 1886 at the age of fifty-six and was buried in the white dress that was her chosen attire in her later years. Her white casket was interred in the family plot at West Cemetery nearby. The headstone, surrounded by an iron fence, carries her name and, beneath the dates of her birth and death, the inscription "Called back."

Next to the Homestead is the Italianate mansion the Evergreens, built by her father to entice her brother, Austin, to join his law practice. Austin's wife, Susan, who was one of Emily's closest friends, composed her obituary, which emphasized that those who knew her best understood her life, though she lived in obscurity and without much exterior incident, as exceptional and rich.

The death of Miss Emily Dickinson, daughter of the late Edward Dickinson, at Amherst on Saturday, makes another sad inroad on the small circle so long occupying the old family mansion. . . . Very few in the village, except among the older inhabitants, knew Miss Emily personally, although the facts of her seclusion and her intellectual brilliancy were familiar Amherst traditions. . . . As she passed on in life, her sensitive nature shrank from much personal contact with the world, and more and more turned to her own large wealth of individual resources for companionship. . . . Not disappointed with the world, not an invalid until within the past two years, not from any lack of sympathy, not because she was insufficient for any mental work or social career—her endowments being so exceptional—but the “mesh of her soul” was too rare and the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere for her worth and work. . . .

To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formulated faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life

with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer.¹

After her discovery of the carefully sewn-together fascicles of her sister's poems at her death, Lavinia said she feared they would die "in the box in which they were found."² She enlisted the help of a well-connected friend in the community, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom Emily addressed as "Preceptor" and to whom she once addressed this question after sending him an example of her work: "Mr. Higginson, are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?"³ Mable Loomis Todd, Austin's longtime paramour, who had a college background, was asked to go through the fascicles and separate out the poems for first publication by Higginson in 1890. Higginson called the suddenness of the commercial success of *Poems* "almost without parallel in American literature" and all the more amazing because the author "could not be persuaded to print" and wrote solely by way of self-expression.⁴

In 1998 Harvard University, which houses most of Dickinson's manuscripts, published the definitive edition of her poems edited by R. W. Franklin. This edition collects 1,789 poems, retaining her distinctive capitalization and punctuation, while previous compilations such as that of Martha Dickinson Bianchi in 1930 did not.

In 2017, the Morgan Library and Museum mounted a major exhibition on Emily Dickinson under the title

I'm Nobody! Who are you? The Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson. The Morgan, according to a *New York Times* report, was instantly turned "into a pilgrimage site, a literary Lourdes, a place to come in contact with one aspect of American culture that can truly claim greatness."⁵ On display, in addition to manuscripts of her poems, was the green-leather-bound Bible given to her by her father, to my observation heavily annotated and well worn. There were also a lock of her striking auburn hair and the only known daguerreotype of Dickinson. Sixteen years old, flower in hand, she looks straight at the camera with total self-assurance. At the exhibition's entrance was the oil portrait, done by an itinerant artist, of the three Dickinson siblings, Austin, Emily, and Lavinia.

The exhibition's accompanying catalog states, "The materials collected here make clear that the story of Dickinson's manuscripts, her life and her work is still unfolding."⁶ The Morgan exhibition mirrors the strong assertions made by the poet Susan Howe in her book *My Emily Dickinson*; sweeping away prevailing characterizations of Dickinson as "a victim, a shut-in oppressed by patriarchal society and prevented from publishing during her lifetime," Howe describes her as a fierce and nonconformist mystic of Promethean ambition, a contemplative poet, reader, and scholar.⁷

In 1932, over a century after Emily Dickinson's death, her only niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, published *Emily Dickinson: Face to Face*. In it she describes

their unique times together at the Homestead and her insights into her very special aunt, whose gingerbread she particularly enjoyed. She quotes her aunt as declaring that publishing her poems was “as foreign to my thought as firmament to fin.”⁸

To come upon her suddenly, looking up into the tops of trees, as if listening, not to the sounds of common day, not to her own thoughts, but to a mystic inclusion in some higher beauty known only to herself, forbade that we should fully interpret her. Nor was she lacking in a sort of spiritual arrogance—the right of one to whom much is revealed.⁹

The ever-elusive Emily Dickinson, it seems, always needs to be reintroduced. Terence Davies’s 2017 film *A Quiet Passion*, starring Cynthia Nixon, captured well the inner life of Dickinson, whose exterior life was so notably without event. Critics praised the film as one of the year’s best. One reviewer asked, “How do you dramatize a life lived almost entirely in the mind—and a death she foretold in poems so devastatingly intimate, it was as if a curtain lifted for her into another world?”¹⁰ One of the film’s most dramatic scenes takes place at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where Dickinson was sent, at the age of sixteen, and remained for a year. The class stands at attention. Those who have joined the “saved” depart, followed by “those who need help.” Emily is left standing with the few who are left, the

“no-hopers.” Back at home, we see the family gathering in the parlor, Emily sometimes playing a piece on the piano, the clock ticking, the darkness outside. At the dinner table, Emily’s stern father asks why his plate has a chip on it; Emily takes it outside and smashes it. As an adult woman in another scene, she asks his permission to stay up at night to write at her desk. He acquiesces. She describes him as too busy with his legal briefs to notice. He does buy her many books but begs her not to read them because he fears they may joggle her mind.

A strong, vital personality emerges from the poems composed upon that desk.

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me -
The simple News that Nature told -
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see -
For love of Her - Sweet - countrymen -
Judge tenderly - of Me

(Collected Poems [hereafter, C.P.] 519)

At her desk she discovers her truth, a truth of such “superb surprise,” she has to tell it “slant” in the poetry so that it dazzles “gradually.”

Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind -

(C.P. 1263)

In 2018 a new recording¹¹ of musical settings—composed by Aaron Copland, Gordon Getty, Jake Heggie, and Michael Tilson Thomas—of some of Emily Dickinson's poems was given the appropriate title *A Certain Slant of Light*. Dickinson's personal "slant," her truth, is revealed in the poem beginning "There's a certain Slant of light," which depicts the oppressive darkness of the short yet endless days of winter in New England. One of her most cited works, it bears, as usual, no title. If one were given, it could be "Despair."

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons -
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
We can find no scar,

But intentional difference -
Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - Any -
'Tis the Seal Despair -
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -
Shadows - hold their breath -
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death -

(C.P. 320)

To grasp such despair, we must understand her religious context, the still-vigorous Puritan heritage that demanded the public confession of sin to avert eternal damnation. This is something to which Dickinson would never acquiesce, despite strong family pressure to do so. A feeling of personal diminishment is the effect upon her existence of soaring cathedrals, which convey human insignificance over against the majesty of God. We're just "shadows" holding our breath until overcome by death. As a theologian I would describe such a spiritual situation as "believing unbelief"—the instinctive rejection, despite the cost, of religious conceptions that do not do justice to what we know to be the truth: that heaven is not supposed to hurt and humiliate. When St. Paul presented the Christian faith to the Ephesians,

he prayed, “And now I commend you to God and to that gracious word of his that can build you up and give you the inheritance among all who are consecrated” (Acts 20:32). Build you up, not diminish you.

In this book I reintroduce Emily Dickinson’s poems as examples of mystical prayer in the light of Christian tradition, and of St. Teresa of Ávila in particular. Those who discovered them at her death took them to be independent lyric poems, but I believe they were much more than that. She wrote them for herself—and for God.

ONE

PRAYING MYSTICALLY: “I dwell in Possibility”

What Is Mystical Prayer?

Prayer is more than “saying prayers.” “Saying prayers” (vocal prayer) from our church tradition and praying in public with others are necessary for us as social beings, but prayer is so much more than that. The experience of that “more” in what is called mental or mystical prayer is what makes oracular prayer, prayer with words, possible and meaningful. It is an awareness, beyond words to express, of God’s presence everywhere and always, but especially to me. Jesus instructed his disciples to “pray always” (Luke 18:1). Mystical prayer, prayer from our hearts, comes from a loving union with God, or at least a desire for it. St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) wrote, “Our hearts are made for you, O God, and they are restless until they find their rest in you.”¹

Jesus also told us how to pray: “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your

Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matt 6:6). In mystical prayer we go deeply within ourselves and discover God there. People sometimes speak of extraordinary mystical experiences, visions, and ecstasies, but these are not of the essence of such prayer. In fact the opposite is often true: God experienced as an absence, a darkness, even "nothing."

The church father Origen (185–254) was the first to call attention to the mystical meaning of God's words in Scripture. Beyond the literal sense of the historical text, God speaks to me now, revealing what St. Paul described as "the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past. . . . Christ in you, the hope for glory" (Col 1:26-27). All Scripture, both the Old and the New Testament, has mystical meaning, as Christ declared "even they [the scriptures] testify on my behalf" (John 5:39). According to St. Jerome, Origen surpassed himself as a profound teacher of mystical theology in the ten volumes of commentary he wrote on the Old Testament book the Song of Songs, a title that means the song most sublime of all songs. According to Origen, the Song of Songs, perhaps originating as a marriage manual, is the love song celebrating the mystical marriage between Christ and the church as well as between Christ and the individual soul. Concerning this surpassing love relationship, so evanescent and difficult to describe, Origen writes, "I myself felt that the bridegroom was approaching and that he was as near as possible to me; then he has suddenly gone away and I have not been able to

find what I was seeking."² In an image that resonated throughout the history of Christian mysticism—as, for example, in the writings of another spiritual master, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)—Origen likened the experience of God to being bruised, to feeling yourself pierced with a spear of longing so that you long for him day and night.³

Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), an early twentieth-century exponent of Christian mysticism, described it in general terms as the “ecstatic” (from a Greek word meaning “standing outside of yourself”) experience of God. It is, Underhill continues, entering into eternal bliss, being healed and enlightened, a surrender to the purposes of divine energy and love. Going further, it is the experience of God in the whole created world based upon the incarnation of Christ, who in his person unites all of creation with God.⁴

In the Gospel, Jesus urges, “Look”! (Matt 6:26, 28)—just look at the birds of the air, the flowers in the field, and behold their divine creator. St. Augustine observed that God wrote two books—the book of creation and the book of Scripture, not just one, and that he would not have written the second if we had not been too blind to see his presence in the first.⁵ It would be from this first book, the book of creation, that Emily Dickinson’s mystical visions would arise, as well as from her personal sense of woundedness and longing. She once said “Consider the lilies” was her only commandment.

God's ultimate nature, however, is totally transcendent and beyond human words to express. When God appears to Moses, Moses is initially attracted to God by a fascination with the light from a burning bush. As a humble creature, he takes off his shoes in the divine presence. And when Moses asks God his name, God declares, "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14)—existence itself and the source of all that exists. Another interpretation is that no human word can express me, but you will know who I am by seeing what I do: my actions for your salvation, such as leading Israel to freedom from slavery.

St. Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), in his mystical text *The Life of Moses*, picks up on this theme. Gregory describes the journey into God as endless, a journey not, as one might think, from darkness into light, but the opposite—from the light into darkness. Drawn by the light he sees on the mountain where God dwells, Moses ascends, but once there he discovers the peak covered in darkness. His journey of faith will require that he step off the mountain in that darkness, with nothing to support his feet, to step into God.⁶ St. John of the Cross (1542–1591), the contemporary and disciple of St. Teresa of Ávila, also describes this experience in his work *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah also speaks of faith's journey as an endless pilgrimage.

FIVE

THE DESIRE FOR LOVE: “I cannot live with You”

God Is Love

The two great themes of mystical prayer are the desire for love and the fact of death. Both of these drive a person to the limits of existence and are an introduction to the immensity of God. They unlock the hopes and dreams, the longings and fragility of the human heart. It is in mystical prayer that we reach heart level in our seeking and discovery.

Upon his election as pope in 2005, Joseph Ratzinger pondered what would be his inaugural encyclical. He decided it had to be about love, just love. This, he said, is what the Christian faith is about. Now Pope Benedict XVI, he selected for his text this passage from the First Letter of John: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). At that moment in human history, he writes, religion and

violence seem partners in the eradication of unbelief. But even more centrally to Christianity itself, God's love, the pope writes, has been reduced to an abstraction, to something nonhuman or even antihuman and having nothing to do with us.

More significantly, though, we questioned whether the message of love proclaimed to us by the Bible and the Church's Tradition has some contact with the common human experience of love, or whether it is opposed to that experience. This in turn led us to consider two fundamental words: *eros*, as a term to indicate "worldly" love, and *agape*, referring to love grounded in and shaped by faith. The two notions are often contrasted as "ascending" love and "descending" love. . . . [T]hese distinctions have often been radicalized to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them: descending, oblativ love—*agape*—would be typically Christian while on the other hand ascending, possessive or covetous love—*eros*—would be typical of non-Christian, and particularly Greek culture. Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life. Yet *eros* and *agape*—ascending and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.¹

Pope Benedict goes on to cite the biblical prophets Hosea and Ezekiel in their descriptions of God manifesting passionate love for us using bold erotic images and metaphors of betrothal and marriage. He continues:

We can thus see how the reception of the Song of Songs in the canon of sacred Scripture was soon explained by the idea that these love songs ultimately describe God's relation to man and man's relation to God. Thus the Song of Songs became, both in Christian and Jewish literature, a source of mystical knowledge and experience, an expression of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God—his primordial aspiration. But this union is no mere fusion, a sinking in a nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one.²

St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) was a recently ordained priest of twenty-five when he met St. Teresa of Ávila, then fifty-two and at the height of her reforming powers. She asked him to be her spiritual director and chaplain of the convents of her reformed Carmelite order. When John later started referring to her as “my daughter,” the nuns rebelled. Referring to her *chico*—young in age, short in height—she told them he was “huge” in the eyes of God. His writings of spiritual direction drew heavily upon the Song of Songs, as did Teresa's *Exclamations of the Soul to God*. Inheriting the dry scholastic theology of his day, St. John presents a

much broader horizon, one that is not prissy, stale, or exhausted. God is new, daring, and vital. God's whole aim, he teaches, is to make us *grande*. Outside of God everything is narrow.

When God gazes out upon the abyss of nothingness, the result, he says, is creation flamboyant in beauty. It is God who seeks us out and not the reverse. But for God to enter, we have to make a space, a *nada*. John defines asceticism as "clearing away the ground to make way for the miracle of God."³ When John neared death, his religious brothers began reciting the ritual prayers for the dying, but John checked them: "This is not necessary. Read me something from the Song of Songs."⁴

The Song of Songs is the most cited book of the Old Testament apart from the psalms. Much of it is a dialog between a man and a woman. It begins with the woman's yearning.

Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth!
More delightful is your love than wine!

Your name spoken is a spreading perfume—
that is why the maidens love you.

Draw me!—

We will follow you eagerly!
Bring me, O king, to your chambers.

With you we rejoice and exult,
we extol your love; it is beyond wine:
how rightly you are loved! (Song 1:1-4)

The coming of spring sparks the flame of love.

Hark! My lover—here he comes
springing across the mountains,
leaping across the hills.
My lover is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Here he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattices.
My lover speaks; he says to me,
“Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!
“For see, the winter is past,
the rains are over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of pruning the vines has come,
and the song of the dove is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines, in bloom, give forth fragrance.
Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one,
and come!
“O my dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the secret recesses of the cliff,
Let me see you,
let me hear your voice,
For your voice is sweet,
and you are lovely.” (Song 2:8-14)

The canticles end with the power of love even over death.

Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm;
For stern as death is love,
relentless as the nether world is devotion;
its flames are a blazing fire.
Deep waters cannot quench love,
nor floods sweep it away.
Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love,
he would be roundly mocked. (Song 8:6-7).

This love song, interpreted in both Jewish and Christian traditions as expressing God's seeking of an intimate relationship with the human soul, becomes something entirely different in Emily Dickinson's version of it.

The Heart asks Pleasure - first -
And then - excuse from Pain -
And then - those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering -

And then - to go to sleep -
And then - if it should be
The will of it's Inquisitor
The privilege to die -

(C.P. 588)

In a succession of growing and growing disappointments expressed by the relentless series of "and then,"

“and then,” “and then,” and “and then,” the human heart that at first innocently and trustingly asks God for the pleasure of his love comes to realize that this “Inquisitor” is totally uninterested in her. As her requests become smaller and smaller, she ends by pleading just for the “privilege” of death, please, please. God, she comes to understand, is actually, to use a phrase from Helen Vendler’s interpretation of this most uncomfortable poetic outburst, not her Lover but actually the sadistic Refuser—in fact, her Torturer!⁵

Emily Dickinson’s Yearning for Love

It is surprising to encounter a frankly erotic poem in Emily Dickinson’s corpus. What makes this poem all the more impressive is that the poet is imaging something, were it to happen, that would satisfy her wildest desires—but it never actually took place.

Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were it with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

(C.P. 269)

In the prevailing religious and social climate of New England, Emily Dickinson came to the conviction expressed in many poems that she would never receive the love her heart was seeking. She was taught that human nature was depraved, its deepest aspirations untrustworthy. God, the remote and eternal arbiter of human fate, was coldly indifferent to the cruelty of human existence. And so she developed within herself the strength to defy God, to dethrone God and replace him.

In a poem among her greatest, Dickinson addresses the human lover with whom she wishes to live forever, for without him God's Paradise would be a "sordid excellence"—beneath contempt, filthy. Her greatest fear is that she and he could never become united because he was a believer and she an unbelieving outcast. Their meeting in the end happens in a place of her own creation—the poem we are now reading.

I cannot live with You -
It would be Life -
And Life is over there -
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the key to -
Putting up
Our Life - His Porcelain -
Like a Cup -

Discarded of the Housewife -
Quaint - or Broke -
A newer Sevres pleases -
Old Ones crack -

I could not die - with You -
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down -
You - could not -

And I - Could I stand by
And see you - freeze -
Without my Right of Frost -
Death's privilege?

Nor could I rise - with You -
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus' -
That New Grace

Glow plain - and foreign
On my homesick eye -
Except that You than He
Shone closer by -

They'd judge Us - How -
For You - served Heaven - You know,

Or sought to -
I could not -

Because You saturated sight
And I had no more eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

And were You lost, I would be -
Though my name
Rang loudest
On the Heavenly fame -

And were You - saved -
And I - condemned to be
Where You were not -
That self - were Hell to me-

So we must meet apart -
You there - I - here -
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are - and Prayer -
And that White Sustenance -
Despair -

(C.P. 706)

In this extraordinary poem—extraordinary for its length but especially because of its emotional intensity—Dickinson unveils her inner turmoil nearing despair. She has lost all perspective, obsessing over her lover and their future together. Everything else is secondary,

even God. She cares about nothing else, not personal fame, not Heaven or Hell.

Her list of disappointments is large. The first she mentions is the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, Christ's promise of eternal life through the reception of his Body and Blood. God, referred to in the poem as the Sexton and later as an ordinary Housewife, has locked the chalice up in the church sacristy or discarded it as quaint and cracked. Reading these lines we recall that in the Protestantism then prevailing, the celebration of Holy Communion was infrequent, Sunday worship consisting of Bible reading, sermons, and hymns. The Eucharist, or some attenuated form of it, was a holdover from the discarded Catholic tradition. There was no Real Presence of Christ, just a memorial of something irretrievably in the past. Grape juice was the substitute for wine. When the infrequent communion service took place, only publicly professed believers were allowed to participate—certainly not a person like Emily Dickinson. The poem's last lines return to a eucharistic reference: "that White Sustenance," which no longer signifies salvation but "Despair," the poem's final word.

Teresa of Ávila with her Jewish parentage always felt the need to defend the orthodoxy of her faith by inserting trinitarian language into her mystical treatises. The Spanish Inquisition was constantly looking over her shoulder. This did not mean, however, that her personal experiences of the ineffable God and God's love could not be conveyed through the images she created. I see

something of the same dynamic in Emily Dickinson's mystical poetry, including in the poem we are analyzing here. But she had to reject the God of her culture as a caricature of her personal religious experience, which Teresa did not find it necessary to do.

When Dickinson speaks of God, it has to be in terms that are real and authentic. Nature, it turns out, is a revelation and an encounter with God's Real and True Presence. This she describes magnificently in one of her most famous poems.

Further in Summer than the Birds -
Pathetic from the Grass -
A minor Nation celebrates
It's unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen -
So gradual the Grace
A gentle Custom it becomes -
Enlarging Loneliness -

Antiquiest felt at Noon -
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify -

Remit as yet no Grace -
No furrow on the Glow,
But a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now -

(C.P. 895)

In the magnificent array of nature that is cherished in the New England summer, Dickinson hears a humble chorus of beetles arriving late in the season and celebrating what she perceives to be a Mass. Dickinson collected beetles and preserved them as gifts. Did she see herself as such a humble beetle and her poetry part of their chorus? Beetles are so inconsequential, yet she hears in their chirping the enactment of a religious ritual, a "gentle Custom" that becomes an enlarging "Grace." They announce through their religious canticle, like the liturgical Benedictus and Magnificat, the coming of fall and the Sabbath repose. Nature itself is enhanced by the "Difference" they announce. The progress of the sacred ceremony they enact is gradual and unfolding, revealing the infinite bounds of our loneliness, the empty space, the nothingness, the *nada* of St. John of the Cross, for God's presence to fill as autumn draws near. Nature now is no longer nature, for it is enhanced by what theologians call "sacramental consciousness." This sacramental consciousness opens us beyond present existence to ultimate reality. As Richard Wilbur comments regarding Dickinson's poetic vision, "Therefore her nature poetry, when most serious, does not play descriptively with birds or flowers but presents us repeatedly with dawn, noon and sunset, those grand ceremonial moments of the day that argue the splendor of Paradise."⁶

The sacraments rely on basic human realities to represent and communicate divine realities: bread and

wine, water and oil, human words and human touch. Through nature's sacrament Emily Dickinson and God are meeting at last in a relationship of love.