

## EPIPHANY: ON AND OFF THE MOUNTAIN

The heroine of Daphne du Maurier's famous novel "Rebecca," is not, in fact, called Rebecca. We do not know what she is called because she is not given a name, for the simple reason that Daphne du Maurier could never think of one to give her.

This unnamed girl is poor, shy and totally lacking in confidence. When she meets rich, handsome Max de Winter and he seems to enjoy spending time with her, she cannot believe her luck. She is quite sure that the happy times they are sharing will be only a passing romance in her life. He will move on and she will be left alone. It is this fear which prompts her to say one gloriously sunny afternoon, when they are driving happily through the countryside, *"If only there could be an invention that bottled up memory like scent....And then, when one wanted it, the bottle could be uncorked and it would be like living the moment all over again."*

Perhaps we all wish that. I hope that everyone here has memories of supremely happy moments in your lives, when the place where you were, the people you were with, the food you were eating, the clothes you were wearing, the music you were listening to, all combined to make a perfect memory. Everyone deserves a few times like that in their life. Yet, even as we enjoy these moments, deep down there is a fear that this perfect happiness cannot last for ever, which is why we may well wish that you could somehow "bottle the moment."

One aspect of life where this longing is particularly strong is in religion. People do have these fleeting moments, or even hours when they feel intensely close to God. He seems so near and so real that they could reach out and touch him. They experience a powerful sense of truth and love; peace and goodness. This can sometimes happen in a church service or perhaps out in the countryside; even at times, in crowded areas or troubled places for us but it does happen. It is very real. It is what we call a "mountain-top experience."

And we so want these experiences to last. We do not want to let them go. We want to be able to go back and enjoy that same mountain-top experience over and over again because we need it to keep God close to us in a turbulent life.

This was what Peter wanted when he saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain top. The man he had known as a friend and mentor; the man whose teaching he could not always understand; the man who many people thought was crazy and even Peter sometimes had his doubts: this man was suddenly bathed in shining light. And the two greatest leaders of the nation's history: Moses and Elijah were standing beside him, also filled with light. Peter heard the voice of God, *"this is my Son. Listen to him."* It was, as our hymn just said, an *"awesome sight."*

And Peter not only knew then, that Jesus really was the Son of God, he was also caught up in the experience of Jesus as Son of God. The light of God's presence was all around him. It was more amazing, more uplifting than anything he had ever known before. So, like the girl in the book, he wanted to keep the moment. He asked to create shrines, sacred places, where he could go back and be caught up in that same glorious experience over and over again. Who can blame him? Would not we all ask the same?  
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So why cannot this happen, you wonder? A life of faith can be very frustrating. You can have a powerful spiritual "high" in a church one week, go back the next week and it is gone. You blame the Minister, you blame the organist, you blame the person

sitting beside you who is singing out of tune and you decide to try elsewhere. Another church might provide you with that “high” for a few more weeks or even months but often the spark starts to fade there as well so you blame the Minister, you blame the organist and so it goes on....

Equally frustrating is the fact that you can go along to an act of worship and find it tremendously uplifting but when you try to share this with someone close to you and even persuade them to come along with you and experience it for themselves, they can remain totally unmoved. *Can't see what you are making all the fuss about...*

You can have a time of private prayer one day and feel incredibly close to God. You choose that same time, same place the next day but the intensity of feeling has gone. Why? Is there something wrong with you? Are you not as open to God as you were yesterday? Is your faith not good enough?

You have a strong sense of vocation. You hear- literally hear- God giving you a work to do. So you start putting the wheels in motion to get on with it. But then, when you go back to ask Him a few more questions- did you mean this way or that way? Or when you go back because other people are not co-operating and you start to wonder whether you are really in the right place after all – are you sure about this, God? The voice is not there. And you cannot make God speak again.

Like Peter on the mountain-top, darkness descends. The dazzling light which made everything look so clear and made you feel so great has disappeared and you cannot make that light come back. Why not? You start to wonder about these “mountain-top experiences.” Are they simply illusions, created by something we have eaten or drunk, brought about by our own wishful thinking or religious indoctrination by other people? If they are real, then why cannot they happen all the time?

Professor William James was one of the first scientists to make a methodical study of religious experience. In a lecture on mysticism, which explores “mountain-top” experiences, he described four “marks” which all these experiences have in common. First: they are virtually impossible to describe clearly and rationally to other people. *“No-one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists.”*

Second: although these experiences are chiefly to do with the way we feel at the time, they also succeed in conveying knowledge to us. *“as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”* In other words, they do make permanent changes in the way we think and behave.

Third: they cannot be sustained for long. *Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.*

And fourth: we cannot make them happen. *The mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance....as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.*

It is reassuring to read the results of James’ research because at least it lets us know first, that these “mountain-top experiences” do happen to a large number of people, making them less likely to be the result of our own imaginations or digestive systems; and second that our frustrations with the fact that we cannot prolong these experiences nor explain them fully to others nor re-awaken them of our own free-will is something we have in common with everybody else. It is not our fault that we do not and cannot live continually on the mountain-top.

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So if it is not down to us, that only leaves God. And if God can and does make himself so awesomely real to us in these special moments, then why does he not make these moments available to us all the time?

Thinking about this, I first went back to Daphne du Maurier's novel. Suppose the heroine had been able to bottle that supremely happy moment driving through the countryside with the man she loved and she had then re-opened the bottle, say a year later, when life was pretty hard for her? Would she have recaptured that moment? Yes and No. She might have been able to smell the same scent, breathe the same air, sit in the same car, taste the same food but she herself would have been a totally different person. A year on, she had married Maxim, she had found out a great deal more about him, she had discovered a great deal more about herself, she had grown up incredibly fast and that happy moment from a year ago would simply not have felt the same. Life is not static. We are not static, which is why you cannot "bottle" a moment; it will never be the same because you are never the same.

Now thinking about Peter on the mountain-top: yes, he could have built shrines for Jesus, Moses and Elijah and he could have returned to them over and over again. But each time he came back he would be changed. A year from that day Peter had learned a lot, grown a lot, experienced a lot, and been to hell and back. The chances are that re-living even that supreme moment of transfiguration would not have had the same effect on him.

But why did the girl and Peter want so much to keep those moments? I think, because they were afraid that the love they were feeling and receiving; the sense of joy, the sense of self-worth might shrivel up and die when that moment had passed and they were back in a complex and frightening world.

But in that sense they neither of them had anything to be afraid of. Maxim's love for his wife and her love for him did not depend on that one supremely happy moment. It only grew and deepened through a year of heartache and misunderstandings; horror and tragedy. At the end of a year that love they felt for each other when they drove merrily through the countryside looks pathetic compared to the love and understanding they have now.

In the same way, as Peter lived through the years since that moment on the mountain-top; as he lived through heartbreak and failure, fear and exhaustion, frustration and anger, his relationship with Jesus as friend and Master, his experience of Jesus as Son of God and personal Savior, only grew stronger and deeper. The Peter who finally faced martyrdom in Rome was a million times stronger, happier, more truly united with Christ and aware of the constant reality of Christ, than that naïve, uncertain man who witnessed the transfiguration on the mountain-top.

Like Elisha and Gehazi, you may only catch fleeting glimpses of the chariots of fire, the fullness of God's power and love but the reality of that power and love will always be there.

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We are people who live complex lives in a complex world. We eat and drink, build and plant, learn and create, love and inter-act. We succeed and fail, we enjoy and suffer, we laugh and cry, we fight and rest. We are creatures of many moods and habits and we are not meant to be in a state of continual mystic ecstasy. Even if you had the means to build a most beautiful shrine in the loveliest place and spend the rest of your life doing nothing other than contemplate the glory of God, you would not

remain in a state of holy exaltation for long. You would get tired; you would get bored; you would get frustrated; the darkness would come down because there is a whole world out there and, harsh and frightening though it is, you want to live in it. You cannot help it.

And the most amazing and reassuring thing is that you will come to experience the reality of God just as fully in that real, harsh, dark and frightening world as you do on the mountain-top. You do not have to be afraid of losing God when you come down to earth again. After all, God became a man in Jesus Christ. God lived our life with us; he was hungry and thirsty, lonely and isolated, grieved and suffered, did his best and got it thrown in his face, tried to explain and was misunderstood, was let down by his friends and died in agony. There is no place so dark that God cannot be there. The mountain-top experiences are not an end in themselves (first prize for spirituality to the person who can claim the most hours of mystic ecstasy) but are given by God to feed us, affirm us, inspire us and motivate us as we live and grow in the whole world. In one sense they are not permanent, in that they do last only minutes or hours. In another sense they are permanent in that they have a powerful effect on the way we believe, the way we behave and the people of God we become. We may not be able to bottle the moments but even so, they remain with us for ever.

There used to be a regular column in the Times, compiled by Ruth Gledhill, which made assessments of churches she visited. She would award stars for the welcome, the style of the church building, the preaching, the music and what she called the “spiritual high.” Now I have to say that I am as passionate as anyone can be to see the highest possible standards of worship- leading in churches and that I am as susceptible as the next person to the uplifting effects of beautiful buildings, wonderful music and powerful preaching. But I could also tell Ruth Gledhill that there is no “spiritual high” to be compared with that of a group of Christians-maybe only a small group- who have lived and worked and worshipped alongside each other for many years, who have shared each other’s joys and sorrows, who have listened to each other’s doubts and confusion, who are now joining their hearts in prayer about something they all feel deeply and passionately involved with: that sense of total communion with one another and with the God they have known and served together through a long journey of life: that is the kind of spiritual “high” which cannot be equaled. And there is no need to worry about “bottling it” in case it disappears because you know by then that it will not and it cannot.

The season of Epiphany comes to an end today but we know that our encounters with God will continue both on and off the mountain.  
Thanks be to God.