

# Ken Burton: Radiance

## Radiance

Ken Burton

Seekers Church

February 26, 1995

The two most important recent influences on my spiritual development have been Quakerism (I was a member of a Friends meeting until about a year ago) and the analytical psychology of Carl Jung and those that have followed him. In asking Celebration Circle for the opportunity to speak out of the silence, I stand firmly in both of these traditions. It is, as you probably know, the Quaker practice to speak in meeting only when one feels “led” (Seekers might say “called”) to do so. When it is well done, this type of speaking does not break the silence but rather enriches it. And from the Jungian perspective, silence acknowledges the unconscious. Jung used the image of a cork bobbing on a vast ocean to describe the relation of the ego, the center of consciousness, to the vastness and power of the unconscious, a great sea of energy, image and knowledge, the very existence of which we can know only through inference, and imagination. Both of these traditions teach the wisdom of silence as prelude to speech. In speaking and listening from the silence, we honor both the unconscious and the traditions of knowledge and practice through which we know what little we can about it. And in the silence we create a space in which we can both hear and be spoken to

Well, it’s been quite an Epiphany, in significant part because of the pervasive power of our worship theme, “Images of God.” We began with Peter Bankson’s [table of four million](#) of them. I felt I needed a structured, organized plan for dealing with so

many images. I decided to incorporate one image each day into my spiritual practice. It seemed to me that any image of God, however difficult, was worth at least one day of my time, but after doing a little arithmetic, I discovered that, at the rate of one image a day, it would take in excess of eleven thousand years to get through the list. While I was considering what to do about that, Peter, with no regard at all for my problem, updated his table. Now we have six million images of God. Six million images of God. I have not calculated how long that would take at the rate of one a day. I don't really want to know. The sheer number (and Peter says there are more to come, arising from Andrea's message about God as disabled) reminds us that the reality of the Divine is beyond anything we can cope with or comprehend within our carefully crafted time frames and work plans.

An important part of the season for me has been planning for this sermon for this, the last Sunday in Epiphany, the Feast of the Transfiguration. A Seeker in whom I confided that I would be preaching today suggested at once, without a moment of hesitation, that we could build three booths here on the altar; in the Seeker's words, "one for Peter, one for Sonya and one for you." My first (and unspoken) reaction was that only from the mind of a Seeker could come this offthetwall variety of Biblically based humor, sort of David Letterman meets the New Testament. This incident was an important part of my Epiphany this year, if only because it seemed so strange, but probably no weirder than Simon Peter's remark on which it was based. Of that Luke says "he did not know what he was saying." Peculiar. Then there were the congregational meetings. They, too, were part of this season for Seekers. One way of understanding those meetings is as an effort to make particular images of God come alive in the world as organizational structure and physical plant, a task that has challenged the Church from its inception. When it has been successfully in meeting this challenge, it has always been the consequence of firm grounding in the Divine reality, because

the structures that emerged came from images of God, not from the promptings of boothbuilders. So may it be with Seekers as we continue on our journey into organizational adulthood.

Time prohibits mention of all of the memorable moments of the season which ends today, but I must comment on two more highlights, at least for me. One was David Lloyd's sermon two weeks ago. In it he quoted at length from the work of J. Alvin Sanders, an OT scholar at Union Seminary. This was particularly poignant for me because I had Dr. Sanders as a teacher during the one year I studied at Union in the Sixties. That particular year was also his first on the Union faculty. More to the point, however, was David's clear statement of Jesus' radical ethic of selfgiving love, of the indictment that it represents of how I live most of my life, and of the image of God as lover of me, the unfaithful, the unlovable, the sinner. This was followed last week by Kate Amoss's hymn to the imagination and its role in the life of faith. David's emphasis on the outward journey was beautifully balanced by Kate's exploration of a crucial aspect of the inward pilgrimage. The thought occurred to me that, rather than speaking out of the silence, it might be better for this occasion to simply sit in silence for twenty minutes, being with the images of God that have come up for us during the season.

I realized, however, that I had agreed to bring the word this last Sunday in Epiphany, not to facilitate the silence, so some speaking seemed in order. I have always been fascinated by the Transfiguration story, without ever really knowing why. As I worked with the lections for today, I noticed a common theme, and that theme offered a clue regarding the basis of my fascination. This theme is radiance. In the transfiguration narrative, Luke tells us that "as [Jesus] prayed, his face was changed and his clothing became brilliant as lightning." In Exodus we read that Moses "face was radiant after speaking with Yahweh" and that "the skin on his face shone so much that

[others] would not venture near him." The very language, even in translation, of the Ninety-ninth Psalm is radiant: "Extol Yahweh our God,/worship at his holy mountain,/'Holy is Yahweh our God!'" And in the fifth chapter of Second Corinthians, Paul uses the vocabulary of radiance as he writes of the "new creation" of one who is "in Christ."

*What is all this about? What does it mean to be "transfigured"? Whence cometh "radiance"?*

The moment in my life when I was most vividly aware of this dimension came during the first week of July in 1984. I was attending the Gathering of Friends sponsored by General Conference. This is a week-long event held annually on a college campus and attracting 1500 to 2000 Quakers, many of them children. The 1984 Gathering, the first one that I attended, took place at St. Lawrence University in far upstate New York, about twenty miles south of the Canadian border. The weather was untypically hot and humid, more like Washington in July than what is usual for the North Country. It was early afternoon and I wanted a nap. Due to quite limited financial resources, I was camping and sleeping in a tent rather than living in a dorm room, so I stretched out on my sleeping bag to rest. The emperature in the tent had to have been at least 100 degrees F., and there was little movement of air. It was hot! As I laid there in the heat on the edge of sleep, I was suddenly flooded with a feeling of being loved. (Such a flooding is often considered to be a sign of an authentic spiritual experience.) As I simultaneously reveled in the loving warmth and wondered what on earth was happening, I sensed a Presence there in the tent with me. There was no visual image, only a clear sense that I was not alone. Next came, without words, a sense of comfort and reassurance about the thenmost vexing problem in my life, an issue concerning relationships with women. This was followed immediately by a recollection of the words of Jesus from Matthew and Luke when he assures us of God's love for us by reference to God's care

for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. I had come down from the mountain and was simply lying alone in my hot tent, perspiring.

At one level, what I experienced was an hallucination, produced by the outward circumstances of the moment. Perhaps the same could be said of the Transfiguration story, with reference to different outward circumstances, or of Paul's experience on the road to Emmaus, or of any of the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. Far more important than the outward precipitating factors was the inbreaking of radiance, the eruption into consciousness of energy, images, and ideas generally confined to the unconscious, a reawakening of the numinous in an otherwise routine and mundane life, a moment of transfiguration.

This is heady stuff, as potentially dangerous as it is nourishing. Too many of these images from the unconscious, erupting too often into conscious awareness is close to a definition of psychosis. It is perhaps for this reason that we are told in Exodus 34 that Moses put a veil over his face after he had been in God's presence, thus protecting others from a radiance that was too much for them. But if too much radiance can lead to psychosis, too little can lead to a death-dealing dryness, or to addictive behavior as a defense against the dryness. In the absence of authentic spiritual experience, of the sense of the numinous, of inbreaking radiance, one response is to turn to chemical substitutes such as drugs or alcohol or to other kinds of addictive behavior in a compensatory effort to grasp from whatever source and at whatever price that which is both lacking and desperately needed. God's radiance, breaking into our lives in moments of transfiguration, is indeed life giving but, as a consequence of either absence or excess, also be deathdealing

But how was it for me? How did Ken feel after that numinous moment? It was, first of all, wonderfully reassuring. All of

the promises of faith came alive for me as never before. I knew experientially the meaning of "ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find." I knew Who was ultimately in charge of my life and where I stood in that relationship. I don't always act on that knowledge, but it is mine. All of this did not come about instantly or magically as a consequence of my moment of radiance, but in retrospect there is a clear correlation.

Second, my life became grounded as it had not been since my childhood. I know that God loves me and that frees me to love myself and to love others. My experience in Canton, NY, in July, 1984, was but a first step, but it was a step that set a direction and one has lead and continues to lead to many more. It was, as the Quakers would say, a great "opening."

So let us be prepared for and let us expect moments of transfiguration, times in life when the vertical dimension powerfully intersects the horizontal, numinous moments, radiant times. They come in many different forms and varieties, influenced in part, I suspect, by our differing psychological types. These are the moments in which we see most clearly and know most deeply. Here lies the source of however many images of God. This is Epiphany.