



MISERERE MEI

A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY
THROUGH THE ART OF GEORGES ROUAULT

JOEL KLEPAC, MA, LMFT

PRAISE FOR MISERERE MEI

Klepac's astute and precise reading of Rouault's dark images lead us into the actual darkness of the world. After vivid descriptions of his own experiences with street boys, the homeless, and prisoners in Romania, Russia, and the Czech Republic, Klepac guides readers into a study of their own inner abandonment and forsakenness. A deep meditation on many levels.

BR. PAUL QUENON, OCSO

Trappist at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky since 1958, where Thomas Merton was his novice master

This publication shows how poignantly relevant Rouault's art is to the lives and sufferings of real people then as well as today.

DR. SOO KANG

Professor of Art History, Chicago State University and author of *Rouault in Perspective* and coauthor with Holly Flora of *This Anguished World of Shadows: George Rouault's Miserere*

This book is a spiritual journey that goes deeply into Rouault's art--exposing the depths of despair, loneliness, and hope. And Rouault's visionary art gives Joel Klepac eyes to pay attention to his own life as a therapist, missionary, and spiritual director. The result is a moving meditation on the darkness and light that keeps company with all of us who seek to follow Christ.

WILLIAM DYRNESS

Senior Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. Author of *Rouault: A Vision of Suffering and Salvation* and, most recently of *Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture* (2022).

A unique and influential book! This is a powerful journey of self-discovery from multiple perspectives, beautifully interwoven. Joel is masterful in bringing together in his writing his artistic vision, missionary heart and his Internal Family Systems (IFS) wisdom.

IOANA POPA

MD, BCC, MTS, certified Internal Family Systems Practitioner,
Team For The Soul®, Coaching, Consulting & Spiritual Care

Part art encounter, part memoir, part theological reflection, and part contemplative meditation, *Miserere Mei* shows the formative power of art to reveal, comfort, and

disrupt. In doing so, Klepac brings new life and vibrancy to George Rouault's artistic contribution in the modern world.

WESLEY VANDER LUGT

Director of the Leighton Ford Initiative in Theology, the Arts, and Gospel Witness
at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and author of *Beauty Is Oxygen:
Finding a Faith that Breathes*

Joel Klepac has embraced the vocation of holistic and integral healing, bringing deep wells of compassion to work with street boys in Romania, families in crisis, college students navigating stormy waters. That vocation manifests here as well, now gently taking readers below the tumult on the surface and into depths where an almost startling stillness is both stark and profoundly calming. The meditations on the haunting work of Rouault and on Joel's own remarkable life journey never trivialize or avoid the misery that is our inescapable human experience, but they invite readers into currents that can carry us to new depths of reflection, insight, experience, calm. Plunge into these living waters and you may be surprised where they carry you.

RICK AXTELL

Professor of Religion and College Chaplain, Centre College

In *Miserere Mei*, Joel gently facilitates a healing conversation with the reader's many parts using the tools of Internal Family Systems. Joel's wisdom and lovely heart is evident on every page. If you are looking for a thoughtful and artfully written guide to your healing journey, this will be a great resource.

DAPHNE ECK COPPOCK

MSW, LSWAIC

In *Miserere Mei*, Joel Klepac provides a captivating journey of self-discovery and spiritual reflection through the art of George Rouault. Klepac's work draws his readers into the scriptures through a sense of wonder, showing how beauty and suffering are not exclusive terms. The book is a remarkable testament to the transformative power of creativity and faith, and an invaluable resource for seeing how art allows us to explore the depths of divine life, beauty, and love.

JONATHAN POWERS

Assistant Professor of Worship Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

From the earliest known cave paintings to modern art in the Louvre, art continues to have the power to touch people's hearts and minds. One of the best examples of the power of art can be found in the artwork of Georges Rouault. Joel Klepac has

written a thought-provoking book on the art of Rouault that can help readers go deeper in their faith and find inner healing for their soul.

WINFIELD BEVINS

Director of Creo Arts, Artist-in-residence at Asbury Seminary, and author of *Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation*

I'm grateful for Joel Klepac! Joel is a lover of art, a lover of Christ and a lover of people. The material he brings to these reflections may begin with the "canvas" of Rouault, but it is then enhanced by a poignant combination of the mind of a therapist, the memory of a missionary, as well as the graceful touch of an artist in his own right. Joel's reflections are powerfully, and sometimes painfully, personal. They are all richly beneficial.

RICK DURRANCE

M.Div, D.Min, Rector of Wilmore Anglican Church

MISERERE MEI

A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY
THROUGH THE ART OF GEORGES ROUAULT

JOEL KLEPAC, MA, LMFT

 **Story
Sanctum**
PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2023 by Joel Klepac.

Cover image: Head of Christ, c. 1937. Georges Rouault (French, 1871–1958). Oil on canvas; framed: 128.9 x 99.1 x 8.9 cm (50 3/4 x 39 x 3 1/2 in.); unframed: 104.8 x 75 cm (41 1/4 x 29 1/2 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Hanna Fund 1950.399 © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Interior plates: Miserere, Plates 1-33, c.1914-1918. Georges Rouault (French, 1871–1958). Aquatint with sugar lift, drypoint, burnisher, roulette; 22 3/4 x 16 1/4 inches. Bowden Collections © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Other interior images: c. 2023. Joel Klepac. Oil on canvas.

Cover design and interior formatting provided by Casselberry Creative Design.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the KJV.

Content warning: This work contains stories involving suicide and self-harm related to the lives of children living on the street. If you feel at risk, please seek help; call or text 988 to speak with a professional mental health clinician. This book is not intended as a substitute for professional counseling.

All of the events in this memoir are true to the best of the author's memory. Some names and identifying features have been changed to protect the identity of certain parties. The author in no way represents any company, corporation, or brand, mentioned herein. Therapeutic process stories are based on author's own personal therapy and not on client narratives.

Story Sanctum Publishing.
First Edition.

ISBN: 979-8-9886653-3-5

*to my wife
who has been with me through it all
and to my children
who inspire me to tell stories*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	11
PLATE 1: MISERERE MEI.....	19
PLATE 2: CHRIST REVEILED	29
PLATE 3: FOREVER SCOURGED	37
PLATE 4: TAKE REFUGE.....	45
PLATE 5: ALONE	53
PLATE 6: CONVICTS.....	61
PLATE 7: KINGS.....	69
PLATE 8: MASKS	77
PLATE 9: BEAUTY ON THE WAY	85
PLATE 10: THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD.....	93
PLATE 11: CASTAWAY	101
PLATE 12: HARD TO LIVE	109
PLATE 13: SWEET TO LOVE	117
PLATE 14: PLEASURE.....	125
PLATE 15: FRESH TO BITTER	133
PLATE 16: RESERVED SEATS.....	141
PLATE 17: EMANCIPATION	149
PLATE 18: THE CONDEMNED	157
PLATE 19: HOLLOW PHRASES.....	165
PLATE 20: FORGOTTEN	173
PLATE 21: OPPRESSED.....	183
PLATE 22: SOWING.....	193
PLATE 23: LONELY	205
PLATE 24: WINTER	213
PLATE 25: THE SAILOR.....	221
PLATE 26: TERROR	231

PLATE 27: FAILURE	243
PLATE 28: BELIEVE	253
PLATE 29: SING.....	265
PLATE 30: BAPTISED	275
PLATE 31: LOVE ONE ANOTHER.....	285
PLATE 32: RECOGNITION.....	295
PLATE 33: VERONICA’S DELICATE LINEN	307
AFTERWORD.....	315
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	319
INDEX TO GUIDED MEDITATION THEMES	321
BIBLIOGRAPHY	323
ENDNOTES	330

INTRODUCTION

Arriving at Rouault's Doorstep

A simple wooden cross was attached to the front wall in my childhood church, a perfect lower case “t” that stood isolated, suspended around two-thirds of the way up. In the back corner was a small, glassed room with a few cribs and bright-colored Noah’s Ark wallpaper. More than that, I remember the solid, smooth feel of the oak pews we sat in or crawled under. In the “under pew” world was a deep cadmium red and black maze of octagon and square patterns in the carpet. The edges of the pattern were soft and varied and had a swirly flowery thing in the middle of the octagons. It had a mesmerizing effect. The Russian word for beautiful comes from their word for red, and as a young kid trying to make it through a church service, I think I felt this to be true. If nothing else, the carpet told me that this was a special place, and that we were people worthy to walk on red carpet, like royalty in fairy tales. Other than this abstract aesthetic religious experience involving the carpet, my growing-up church spaces were sparse and only theologically meaningful by accident.

Our next church met in a middle school cafeteria: cement block walls, ceiling tiles, movable chairs, polished concrete floors, lots of wires, microphones, music stands, and a preaching pulpit. There were two tables set up on either side for families to go to during the music to take communion. The right-side table had the grape juice, and the left side table had the wine. We used the tiny plastic disposable wine cups and tore off pieces of homemade bread that was usually on a large silver platter. Nothing in the aesthetic arrangement gave the sense of the sacred. Closing one’s eyes seemed the best way to worship.

As a 16-year-old, I began playing guitar; the first song I learned to play and sing was Keith Green’s version of “Create in Me a Clean Heart, Oh God,” a protestant song version of Psalm 51 (Psalm 50 in Orthodox Church), the first line of which is the reference for the title of Rouault’s series *Miserere et Guerre*. Playing and leading people in singing songs like these became a big part of my religious identity – helping people experience the presence of God, to experience, compassion and repentance that might bring them to fuller expressions and actions of care for others. The focus was on emotional

authenticity and entering into a sacred space of the music, eyes closed.

Studying painting in college, I began to be attentive to visual aspects of everything around me. Naturally, my church spaces became the victims of a growing artistic snobbery. As I learned more about color, line, and form, I became painfully aware of how little attention was paid to these very real elements we move through every day. Everything could be seen from an aesthetic perspective. I quickly realized that this aesthetic aspect of life, which was becoming a source of fascination, was more or less ignored entirely by my small local religious community. There was little or no awareness of some of the great religious aesthetic traditions of medieval and Renaissance churches.

These dynamics left me feeling orphaned, becoming aware of color, line, shape, and form in a subculture which could only tolerate visual representations of verbal doctrines. Having never been in a church which seemed to take aesthetics as important, I doubted whether one could truly be a Christian and truly be an artist. This dilemma found an initial answer in the biography of the life and work of Georges Rouault (1871-1953), widely respected in the 20th-century art world and who was also a deeply religious Christian family man whose life might have been regarded by me at that time as “truly Christian.”¹ He wedded authentic aesthetic values with a rich spirituality in a way I had doubted was possible from my limited perspective, and now I had a hero who held together spirituality and aesthetics without compromising either.

In 2004 my family and I traveled from Romania, where we were living at the time, to visit extended family in the Cleveland area, and I was able to get to the Cleveland Art Museum. I was indignant that Rouault’s *Head of Christ* (c. 1937) was not on display.² On our way out the door, I inquired at the desk whether there was any way to be able to see the painting. I pulled out my sob story of living in Romania and not being able to get to the museum normally.

The kind folks asked their management what could be done. They arranged for me to return in two days, when they would pull the painting out of storage. Upon returning, they took me back to a large office area with a sea of desks. Against the back wall was the painting on a cart, with a folding chair placed in front of it. After spending about 45 minutes in front of the painting, I was invited to the print room. Once there, they gave me latex gloves so I could handle the prints graciously brought to my table.

Upon seeing my enthusiasm, the print curator brought out a large flat box on a cart. It was a full set of Rouault’s *Miserere* (1948). The attendant opened the box and invited me to look through the entire set one by one. I had seen ten or twenty, but seeing them all in context, in order, on a table in a quiet room was startling. It was a sacred encounter with a piece of the soul of Rouault.

I brought into that quiet space of the print room visions of kids I was working with who lived on the street in Romania. Rouault had a way of holding that pain and brokenness, sitting with it, and seeing light beyond it without hurrying out of the darkness.

Twenty years later, I am a marriage and family therapist still fascinated with the inner life. By means of his work, Rouault continues to sit in the ashes with parts of myself I would rather disown; he points to people in our lives who are suffering and says, “Look at that sacred being in front of you.”



The following reflections through the *Miserere* series are not intended to be scholarly arguments, but rather expressions of my relationship with the work of Rouault. I hope to be true to the spirit of Rouault and somehow testify to the power of art to transcend time and place, race and religion, ideology, and every form of difference imaginable; to speak to the shared experiences of humankind. And despite the very real and beautiful differences found in the human community, through empathy for the other, we can render those differences impotent to cut off our sense of belonging to one another.

Just over 100 years have passed since this work was completed. The elapsed time has not diminished the power of this work to connect with core human experiences, both the darkness and the unconquerable light.

Saint Isaac the Syrian in the 7th century described “hubba Šapya” as a love that “cannot be obtained by deeds of philanthropy or, in general, by human effect; it is a gift which we receive directly from God.” Isaac’s teaching on how the love of neighbor is acquired can be outlined as follows: a person withdraws himself from his neighbor for the sake of life in solitude and stillness; through this he acquires an ardent love of God; and this love gives birth in him to the “luminous love” (hubba šapya) of humanity.³

Many marvel at the reclusive habits of Georges Rouault. He generally came out of his studio only to eat and to be with his family or a few close friends. One wonders whether the luminous love for humanity spoken of by St. Isaac the Syrian was not present in Rouault. The way he viewed people is manifest in his depictions of them in his art. His luminous love seems to be seen in his gracious approach to the characters surveyed over his career.

Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), an eminent Catholic philosopher and close friend of Rouault, wrote that there was in him, “like a spring of living water, an intense religious sentiment, the stubborn faith of a hermit... which made him discover the image of the divine Lamb in all the abandoned and rejected for whom he felt a profound pity.”⁴

And if, “The world’s worst evil is the fear of loving,”⁵ perhaps Rouault intends an exorcism of fear by his escapades through the darkest parts of the human experience. My hope is that the reader will make their own inner

connections with these pieces and make steps towards more freedom from fear to spending more time in the state of compassion.

These reflections follow the movements of the first 33 prints of the *Miserere* series rather than in chronological order. For clarity and context, I have included here a very brief biography of Rouault and my own life.



Georges Rouault ⁶

Georges Rouault's History Timeline

Rouault was born May 27th, 1871, in Paris, and enrolled in the School of Fine Arts in Paris in 1889 to study painting with Gustave Moreau, also the teacher of Henri Matisse. In his mid-twenties he converted to Catholicism, and in his forties World War I began. In that period, he began his *Miserere* series. The complete series includes 58 prints in the final presentation and was shown for the first time in 1948. The work is a meditation on a religious and spiritual journey of repentance from an artist who lived in Paris through two world wars.⁷

Personal History Timeline

Most of these reflections draw on experiences during my time living in Romania between 2000 and 2009. There are several that go back to growing up in northeast Ohio until graduating high school in 1993, to a 5-month time in Murmansk, Russia in 1993-1994, and a 6-week trip to India in 1998, after college and before Romania. Since Romania, I attended graduate school, obtained a masters in marriage and family counseling, and started practicing in 2012 through the present. More recently, becoming an Internal Family Systems trained therapist added a lens through which to see human functioning in a more granular way.

Methodology

This writing project began as a way to dive deeper into Rouault's work, and to reflect on the inner connections made with parts of myself and the stories that have stayed with me over the years. I approach Rouault as a therapist of the soul, guiding the viewer through inner territories. What began as a couple of reflections on my favorite pieces turned into working with the first 33 pieces.

I don't come to this work as an art historian. However, as an artist myself, I started each reflection with a look at what was there in the print, what some of the historical, cultural, or theological elements there were that seemed apparent and important. I then sat back and entered the piece with an open heart, noticing what personal memories were evoked by the themes being presented. By the end of each meditation, I tried to bring together some of the personal themes, and themes that seemed apparent from an art critical analysis of the elements of the piece. I do not claim to hold any definitive interpretations or meanings for Rouault's work, only an honest desire to look deeply into the mysterious mirror of darks and lights that illuminate human experience.

I hope that you would not stop at reading these meditations, but that you would be open to unearthing your own connections with these fundamentally human themes.

What is Internal Family Systems?

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a current evidence-based mental health therapy. While this book is not intended to replace therapy, it is based at least in part on some of the assumptions of IFS. It evolved out of family systems theories applied to the inner world of the individual. Initially, Richard Schwartz, the developer of the model, was working with folks with eating disorders and noticed them talking about “the part of me that binges” and “the part of me the restricts” and “the part of me that purges.” He took the intuitive leap and began to facilitate sessions like he would with a family, engaging each of the parts and trying to understand the motives and fears of each one. He was surprised to find how much therapeutic movement could happen through work with these parts.

Schwartz began to discover that there were at least two kinds of basic parts that all people seem to have and that simply get exaggerated in response to trauma. Some have a protective role and others seem to hold overwhelming emotion for the system. There are many ways to get to know these parts of us, and it was in this frame of mind that I began to consider how Rouault's *Miserere* series might help us understand and get to know parts of ourselves as they resonate with parts of us longing to be seen and

heard.

Schwartz was surprised to find that as clients differentiated parts and explored them, there emerged some core spiritual qualities that didn't seem like the protective or exiled parts. This spiritual core, he found, had qualities like compassion, connectedness, calm, curiosity, and openness of heart among other things. Finding this in even the most traumatized clients led him to his own awakening to spiritual realities he had denied for so long. When asking his clients what this was, clients would say, "That's just me." For lack of a better term, he settled on calling it "Self" or "Self-energy." The state of being "in the heart" in Eastern Orthodox spirituality, or similar states described in the major world religions came to be seen by Schwartz as the true therapist that can heal and guide the individual. In Rouault, this state seems evident in his compassionate posture towards humanity.

The guided meditations included in this book are geared in part to help the reader find that state of compassion or being "in the heart" when addressing their own parts evoked in the meditations. (See Video "Intro to Internal Family Systems (IFS) by Dr. Richard Schwartz" for a more complete introduction to IFS.) If you find it difficult to approach your parts with openness of heart and some base level of compassion, it is better to wait or work with an IFS guide.

Guide and Cautions for Levels of Engagement

While this is not intended to replace mental health therapy, these images, themes, and narratives can be evocative and distressing, with stories involving suicide, self-harm, and abuse. Some readers may come to this book with a trauma history. The higher the level of trauma history, the more caution is advised, including working with an IFS therapist and gauging the level of intensity for engagement with the work. It is important to find your window of tolerance, enough emotional engagement but not overwhelming emotional engagement. Rouault's images and themes are intended to get us in touch with parts of us that are often underground and overlooked. For spiritual and psychological growth, some people need increased intensity to get in touch with disowned parts of themselves. Others get flooded easily with intense emotion and need lower intensity in order to get the growth and healing needed. Please honor your inner system and your needs for safety and stretching appropriate to your current growth. In other words, ask yourself, where is that level of emotional intensity that is enough in order to learn and grow and where is it not so overwhelming to the point of shutting down or feeling emotionally flooded. There are at least three levels of intensity you may engage in this book. I ask you to engage at the level that is right for you.

Lowest level of intensity - simply spend time with the images, reading each chapter and skipping the meditation at the end of the chapter.

Medium Intensity - spend time with the image, read the text, and journal around the written guided meditations.

High Intensity - spend time with the text and listen to the audio guided meditations, pausing as you go to do your inner work. (This is only recommended for those high-level spiritual practitioners or folks very familiar with Internal Family Systems parts work, or under the direction of an IFS therapist or IFS practitioner.)

There are some stories involving suicide and self-harm related to the lives of children living on the street. If you feel at risk, please seek help; call or text 988 to speak with a professional mental health clinician (psychologytoday.com – Find a Therapist).

It is my deepest desire that these meditations would be a springboard for your personal growth. Often, when things get intense, we need a guide to help us find our way through our inner system to find healing and peace. While there are many evidence-based therapies that are highly valuable to this growth, I would recommend finding a therapist trained in the Internal Family Systems model as you will see discussed below. Also, the guided meditations follow the IFS model and you can bring unfinished work to an IFS therapist to naturally continue if needed. You can search for a trained IFS therapist here: **ifs-institute.com/practitioners**. For more information about Internal Family Systems, please visit **ifs-institute.com**.

Following each chapter is a guided meditation meant to offer the reader another opportunity to explore their own inner system of protective and exiled parts evoked by Rouault's images, the narratives, and reflections. While some of these meditations touch on exiled parts, they stop short of the complete witnessing and unburdening process needed for more complete healing. This should be done with an experienced IFS practitioner or IFS therapist. To listen to the guided meditations, you can either scan the provided QR code or go to **tinyurl.com/rouault-meditations**.



Plate 1

PLATE 1: MISERERE MEI

"Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam"

"Have Mercy on Me, O God, after Thy Great Goodness"

The first song I learned to play on guitar in my attic bedroom as a sixteen-year-old came from the words of Psalm 51 "Create in me a clean heart, O God."⁸ The opening piece of Georges Rouault's *Miserere* series presents the viewer with a print with three internal frames. The third drawn frame creates an arch over the downturned profile of a head in the bottom center of the picture, separating it from the winged face above. Another two branches separate the faces which are reminiscent of laurel used in martyrs' crowns. The top face is a disembodied countenance recalling decorative images of the sun with a face. The "Winged Sun" suggests the Hebrew connotation of the image with Hebrew seals recalling scripture as in Malachi 4:2: "*But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings*" (KJV).

The original prints are large format, over 2 feet tall (25.88 inches). This makes the head of Christ in the full format images in rough proximity to a life-sized human head. These pieces are very much a one-to-one encounter, image with viewer, person to person. From a couple of feet away, they fill the viewer's field of vision almost completely, as would looking out of a large window. Small digital reproductions really don't do justice to the encounter with the images in person.

The profile head is very close in imagery to the next plate in the series, a downturned head of Christ, also at the bottom of the picture plane. It is in contrast with the neutral face, not happy or sad or anxious, but present, watching as the sun looks down upon the realm below.

Rouault had written poetic lines on separate pages from the prints and later the publishers placed them below the prints. I will refer to them as "associated stanzas" or "poetic lines" in order to respect Rouault's desire to allow the prints and poetry to have some separation and not function like titles in a traditional sense. They function more like a call and response, a litany related but separate celebrants, both helping on the journey of repentance. The language of titles moves us into rationalizing that tends to take us out of our bodies and more visceral awareness. By presenting them

separately here, I hope the reader will take time with the images before reading the associated poetic stanzas on the following page.

The word “Miserere” – translated as “Have Mercy” – conjures the penitential psalm from the Catholic liturgical cycle and daily prayers, and the most used psalm in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. I will just refer to this psalm as the “*Miserere Psalm*” or Psalm 51 to avoid the numbering confusion.

In the Catholic Church, the Miserere Psalm is revered and placed in the prayers of repentance and absolution. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is prayed at least three times a day in full monastic life. It retains importance in Jewish practice as part of many feasts and ritual practices.

Contrasted with the Suffering Christ in the bottom of the image in Plate 1, the face at the top is placid like the sun. In this we may see the passionlessness of the Godhead in the passion of Christ, the divine apatheia of God.⁹ According to this theology God does not react, but only acts. God does not move out of anger, sadness, or emotive force, but out of voluntary compassion, out of the depths of his mercy, out of His being as love. He is not moved to compassion, because He is and always has been essentially compassion. His nature is manifest or revealed, but not changed. It is interesting how the science of compassion in the social neuroscience literature is reflecting this same dynamic, that true compassion actually has to have a passionless aspect to it.¹⁰ There has to be enough detachment and differentiation for room for the other person's experience and then compassionate action; compassion without compulsion.

The winged sun face above Christ also recalls the words from heaven at the baptism of Christ, “Behold this is my son with whom I am well pleased.” Eastern iconography of the baptism of Christ emphasizes the unveiling of the three persons of the Trinity – the voice of the Father, the Spirit in the form of a dove, and the Son. A similar kind of trinitarian view of the work of Christ may be seen here, the action of Christ's compassion seen in the context of the trinity, mutual submission in love. The Christ in this work begins in the state of eternal belovedness.

Romania, August 2003 - Journal entry

“Worked on the *Danube from the Balcony* painting idea this morning. I couldn't bring myself to put a boat in it. Not yet at least. It's dark and mysterious and the river is a wild gurgling mass with banks at the bottom and top of the canvas. I couldn't help but think of Phillip Sherrard material about the interconnectedness of divine spirit and matter.¹¹ The picture is of the *material* – bottom of the painting, the near shore of the river, and the *spiritual/divine* – the distance at the top more surreal to the sky. The river



is this present, yet flowering mass which connects the two, but really there is land under the water which actually physically connects the shores as well as becomes a vessel for the uncrossable river. This is the connected mass, yet non-confusion of the banks of the river, the spirit and the flesh are just as real, it is only perspective which transfigures the spirit to a less solid appearance, though it is just as concrete. The river is very material, but it flows, moves mysteriously, has unexplored depths, is dark yet luminous, life-giving yet sucks the living into its depths and consumes life; it is beautiful and ugly, cleansing yet dirty, and full of illness and disease being carried down river. One can speed along its surface or fight to exhaustion and still move down river. Birds swim in the air above and fish fly through its murky currents eating the dead and the living, cleaning and carrying the disease of the waste...”

I believe that Rouault saw an interpenetration of the transcendent and the immanent, the spiritual and the material. The historic debate about the use of images, the iconoclast controversy between east and west were understood as being tied to the theology of how God could be fully God and fully human in Christ. Language that emerged from platonic roots, “commingled but not confused,” became key to holding the tension of difference in unity, in Trinitarian theology, in incarnational theology (how Christ can be God and human at once), but also extends into understanding of how an image or icon can be intimately commingled with God without being God. It applies to anthropology as well: God is in our neighbor while not confused with actually being God. As seen in the creation theology: God is commingled with the tree or ecosystem without being the tree or ecosystem. Quite literally, “as you do it to the least of these you do it to me” (Mt 25). In other words, God’s energies animate all things, while His essence is still something separate, outside of all created things, Being before being, intimately commingled without confusion. Another term sometimes used is

panentheism, God in all, without confusion with created things.

Thomas Merton's famous vision echoes Rouault's vision on the divine shining through humble vessels:

*"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. ... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. ... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."*¹²

Rouault found a way to show the world this radiance through his graphic medium.

So perhaps Rouault here, in a visual shorthand, in this opening image signifies the immanent Christ and the transcendent sun. The arch enclosing Christ becomes his being God, cramped in the space of human flesh. The layers of reality converge in His incarnation; spirit and flesh meet.



Gregory of Nyssa espoused the idea of the "whole humanity," the first creation of humankind, not just of the individual first human, but the whole humanity created across time. Christ being the head of that "whole humanity."¹³ It would be understood that we are in a redemptive process of healing and reconciling the whole humanity, including cultures, nations, families and neighborhoods; but also our inner communities, our inner parts and especially those parts of ourselves that have been barred from the table, often our pain or trauma-holding parts.

I don't know how much Rouault may have thought in these terms, but the spirit of the Miserere Psalm is one of self-reflection, seeing one's own brokenness. I don't read finger-pointing in Rouault's work, but compassionate holding of those people in our world and those parts in ourselves that are in need of presence, healing, joy, truth, restoration, deliverance, and reconciliation. Although it is a reach perhaps, I see in Rouault's work a seeking of all lost parts of humanity, something akin to the whole humanity of Nyssa.

Rouault has been criticized for the darkness of his images, most poignantly by Léon Bloy, his mentor, perhaps one of his most brutal critics. I believe his move towards the dark was his instinct towards this kind of reconciliation. The more we see ourselves in our neighbor, the more we sense our shared humanity.

I end this section with the Miserere Psalm and invite you to consider entering into the spirit of Rouault's *Miserere* series with an openness to consider your own personal growth and healing. Whether you are religious or not, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or atheist, read it as it feels comfortable and helpful to your inner system as you long for healing and belovedness.

Psalm 50/51 Miserere Mei...

"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightiest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar."

GUIDED MEDITATION

Take a moment to find a place to be still and quiet. See if it feels ok to close your eyes and count 5 breaths.

As you find yourself feeling settled inside, just check and see if it feels ok to proceed with the meditation to explore more of the inner dynamics happening as you read this chapter. Do you have the emotional space in your life right now? Please honor your need for less emotional intensity and come back to the meditation later if that is what is needed. If you feel ok, go ahead and continue on in the meditation.

Start with just noticing any body sensations that arose as you read and that you are feeling now in your body. Often there may be a tightness in the chest, gut heaviness, lightness or tingliness. What do you notice?

In what ways does the first line, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness” resonate with you or annoy you? Make room for whatever reaction you may have.

Spend a few minutes noticing what it may have felt like to receive mercy in your life or to give mercy. See if you can focus more on the experience of mercy giving or receiving vs thoughts and ideas about mercy.



To engage with the high intensity level audio version described in the introduction, scan the QR code or visit tinyurl.com/rouault-meditations.



Plate 2

PLATE 2: CHRIST REVILED

"Jésus Honni..."

"Jesus Reviled..."

The poetic phrase "Jesus Reviled..." is the entry point Rouault offers to this image in Plate 2 of the series. The bleak landscape puts Christ down. Visually His head rises only to the middle of the picture plane, face glowing brightly, contrasted by black hair and crown of thorns. His is the downcast face, bearing the burden of suffering. It echoes the introductory image in Plate 1 of the series. The reviling words or blows from beatings, presumably, are in the air, as if the atmosphere were pressing down upon Him. We are not sure if it is over, or just a pause for the next blow to land. His face is down, and the divine head gazes at the earth below in a simple gesture that is the whole Philippians 2:5-11 "kenotic hymn" in a single image, self-emptying song of the early church services. It is as if Christ from all time intended to empty Himself, in order to suffer with all and to raise all flesh in the resurrection.

In the early church writers, Christ found His way down to earth, became flesh, went down to His death, and then immediately went down to Hades to conquer "death by His own death," as the Eastern Orthodox Paschal Hymn declares, "Christ has trampled down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life." Right out of the gate, Rouault's Christ is one who joins humanity in the exiled places of shame.

Here Christ takes on flesh, identifies with humankind and all its humiliation, not just in general, but specifically with all those poor and oppressed, outcast and forgotten. He endured the active shaming of the crowds and the guards. Part of the death He was to conquer once and for all was the death of being reviled, demeaned, diminished, disrespected, or being stripped not just of clothes but of dignity, of being recognized in His and our humanity. While being reviled in this image, He is seen in a moment of taking on the shame of humankind. In this He is pictured as a radiating light in the darkness, divine light shining through reviled flesh. The unconquerable image cannot be overcome any more than the sun can be extinguished by clouds. So, too, those stripped of humanity by judgement, blame and criticism, stripped of humanity with the most ordinary of linguistic devices, a label like "blasphemer," or any other label we might

choose to justify the removal of empathy and compassion.

Romania, 2006

Ion asked me to go with him to visit some relatives of his, knowing that his uncle had become a Christian some years ago. He is always dying for the chance to talk about his new faith with “his people,” Roma.¹⁴

We entered the courtyard through a big metal gate to find his aunt lying on a couch moved outside to enjoy the summer air. It was a regular living room couch that they would put a tarp over at night. She was resting her Sunday away when we walked in. She didn't immediately recognize Ion, but with a few words in Roma (Romani language), her face lit up. Roma are divided up into different tribes, of which Ion is from the “skirt-wearing” tribe. It was evident that we were on Roma territory as soon as we walked in, as we were greeted by ladies wearing beautiful bright colored and layered skirts, long braided hair, and patterned scarf head coverings. One of these women made sure we had stools to sit on so that Ion could tell us his story.

He told the aunt how he chose to be in the family of God, and through faith in Christ his life is changed. Without pausing, he told how he could now read the Bible and write, how he was going to school and getting his birth certificate. “God is in my life.” He would go on as long as he could about his new faith, about not being on drugs or alcohol for a year and four months. She motioned to one of her stepdaughters who had been listening in, “His face is changed, isn't it? He looks good.” Then without a blink she turned to him and asked, “So why don't you find a girl and get married?”

It seemed clear to me that without the evident change in his face from what it was a couple years ago, they would have probably been impatient with all his preaching. The same thing happened each time a new person entered the courtyard; strange looks, “Who is this?” “Oh yeah, that kid who would beg from everyone,” “That messed up kid who lived down there,” and then, “He looks good,” “He is different.” This always prompted Ion to another sermonette.

Ion did have very yellow skin before due to his chronic illness and bad blood tests. However, that alone didn't account for the awe in his relatives' eyes when they saw him and he claimed, “Christ has done a miracle in my life.”

As things often happen, this little visit occurred on Transfiguration Sunday. In Romanian, the Transfiguration is referred to by the ordinary words, “the changing of the face.” The Eastern Orthodox understanding is that the transfiguration was not so much a light show, as it was the scales coming off the Disciples' eyes; they saw Christ as He always is. The veil came off and they really saw Christ. As Ion's aunt and other relatives asked

him, “Why don't you find a girl and get married,” they were acknowledging that they had finally seen Ion not as “street trash,” a “beggar” or a “pest,” but as an eligible bachelor. They saw him with new eyes. They saw beyond the labels.

The religious systems labeled God in Christ as bad, worthy of capital punishment. In the end it was the religious systems that were shown to be faulty, defunct, and impotent to discern the divine dignity in the human frame. Religion crucified God, putting to shame all human systems of righteousness.

In Rouault's image depicting Christ being reviled, beaten, we are placed in a front row seat to God in the position of the abused outcast. By extension, there is a divine identification with all outcasts, all those reviled, all those who are stripped of the dignity of being seen as divine beings in human flesh. The indignity experienced by Ion was not foreign to Rouault's Christ reviled.



In some way, there is a part of each of us that carries shame. A part that holds the pain of being reviled. Other aspects of ourselves fill the mind with self-criticisms, beatings that last years, “If only I...,” “I should have...,” “I can’t believe I am such a ...”. Rouault's Christ is inside there sitting in the ashes with that part that continues to be reviled in us. The part often waits for healing, for a kenotic descent into the depths of the human psyche to reach down and speak dignity back in, to bring understanding and self-forgiveness. Our severe hatred for our neighbor or enemy is only a reflection of our hatred for these inner parts in isolation, tortured by our own fierce guards hurling insults. Rouault's Christ is reviled again any time we revile ourselves, our neighbor, or our enemy.

Kentucky, 2021

Focusing on my caregiver part, doing Internal Family System Therapy parts work, I notice that some memories drive my inner caregiver (the aspect of my internal system focused on caregiving as a way to protect from other intense feelings). The histories of abuse people close to me had suffered left me feeling there was no room for me to care for my own parts that held loneliness and hurt. The voices of social justice leaders who highlighted the cruel realities of the world's poor rang in my head and reinforced this idea. How could you not sell everything and care for the poor, the war victims, children, women caught in the sex trade, human trafficking, and the list went on and on (and still does).

But the conclusion for my caregiver part was, as with my family and so with the world, “There is no room for me to dare to take up room or attention, the suffering is so great out there.” “Only a terrible person would nurture their own pain, stand up for their own needs.” I am sure that this was a big part of my attraction to Rouault early on, that he was fitting the narrative of my caregiver part, sacrificing all for the suffering world. It is a black and white world with which my inner part resonated. Unfortunately, care for others was framed in total opposition with care for self. The extreme of caregiving for me was about finding a way to be seen and to belong, to be accepted, to have a role that allowed me to matter and be valuable to others. While often looking very compassionate, it has been often driven by a fear of being lost and alone if I were to ever lose my role as caregiver.

I honor the caregiver part and all its intentions for me, to help me belong and have a valuable place, and then speak to its fears by letting it know about those in my life now who love me and support me regardless of being a caregiver 100% of the time.

Going deeper into the caregiver’s concerns, I see a real fear that if the caregiving is peeled away, somehow I will not be loved and valued. Caregiving hides this shame, this fear of being unlovable or lost if not for extreme caregiving. That part in me now gets to hear from the voice of love, “You are good enough,” “You are beloved,” “Nothing you do can add or take away from your belovedness.” And, “Love and give freely, without compulsion or necessity, no need to prove or earn anything, you are already seen, heard and valued.” And, “Let the shame wash away, and feel the refreshing waters of fidelity, solidarity and connection.”

I encourage the reader, caution the reader, to enter into these waters, not to pile on more shame of what you have done or not done, criticizing yourself, but rather to honor those parts of you that have been trying hard, to see and address your fears that are the barriers to your compassionate core self-leading.

GUIDED MEDITATION

Take a moment to find a place to be still and quiet. See if it feels ok to close your eyes and count 5 breaths. Check and see if you have emotional space to sit with this meditation.

Are there self-labeling habits you have that limit your freedom, limit your creativity, and limit your being fully alive? Can you notice and acknowledge that critical part of you, that part that reviles other parts of you? Can you just get curious about that critical part for a few minutes? What can you notice about that critical part? Does it have a tone or flavor or quality you can discern? If you can approach this critical part with curiosity and openness, ask it what it is worried about happening to you if it were to relax and not criticize you so much?

Is there an underlying intention in the critic that you can appreciate? If it feels ok, just ask that critical part what it would need to be reassured of in order for it to not feel the need to cut you down like it does? See if there is a way you could honestly reassure that part. Are there needs that are met in your life now that maybe weren't met when the critical part ramped up in your life?

See if you can't spend a little time appreciating the positive intention of the inner critic. And maybe it is possible to negotiate with it to find less distressing ways to meet that same goal if it is not met already. As in the example above, my inner critic was trying to make me good enough, and it can calm down when I remind it of the people who accept me as I am.

When this inner reflection feels complete for you, take a few moments to return your attention to your breath and to the space around you. Perhaps spend some moments reflecting on the experience and take any notes on things you would like to explore further later or insights you want to hold onto.



To engage with the high intensity level audio version described in the introduction, scan the QR code or visit tinyurl.com/rouault-meditations.



Plate 3

PLATE 3: FOREVER SCOURGED

"toujours flagellé..."

"forever scourged..."

"Forever scourged..." builds Rouault's vision of Christ as one who suffers with all who suffer. In Plate 3, "forever scourged...", we are quickly in the deep end of suffering. Presented as a naked figure, Rouault conjures the passion of Christ, the beatings or scourgings in full swing. Christ's worn-out body stands at an angle as if in mid-fall or being held up by some unseen post. The composition ends at the fingertips, creating strong downward vertical lines of two arms and body.

As in Plate 2, there is a downward visual movement, the head and face echoing the head from Plates 1 and 2, eyes closed, face to the ground. There is no horizon, only an ambiguous sky presumably, dark enough to set off the body of Christ in contrast, making His flesh the strongest highlight in the piece, also outlined in black contours. The black hair is almost a strange shape on top of His head, as if a black weight stands on His head, weighing him down. Though the landscape offers almost nothing in terms of imagery or anchoring, its bleakness and the fact that Rouault was working on it during the duration of World War I lead me to associate this scourged body of Christ with the desolate warscape, the trenches, smoke, and gas.

In "forever scourged...", Christ is identified with suffering; there are none who suffer without Christ suffering with them. Christ's passion and death connects God to all human suffering. Rouault builds on his specific Catholic visual language of the passion of Christ, being scourged, tied to a post and whipped with brutal numbers of strikes. There is a sense of unending suffering.

Rouault was not merely attempting to describe a historical religious story; he was connecting at once the sufferings of humanity in war times to Christ's suffering, the constant bombings, the bringing back of the bodies of the dead, the loss, the desolation of centuries of work, destruction of farmland, homes, and livelihoods. Rouault recounts each atrocity, however small or large, as another blow to Christ, "forever scourged." A hundred years after he created this piece, we can list the atrocities of the past century. From our own inner parts suffering to a whole people suffering genocide.

As long as humanity suffers, Christ is scourged.

Romania, 2001

The Beatings Never End

*they're here again out from the rain
but they are all wet beatings never end*

*hole in her shirt girl cries for tea
fills it with sugar but can't forget dad*

*no job and no power no hope to hold
anger within and family together*

*the girl plays while mother grips
exhaustion, pain and a cup of coffee*

*the streetlight burns and the kid whines
mom closes her eyes to look for something*

Although we crossed paths with this woman in Romania, it is the story of women across the globe, enduring one episode after another of abuse, feeling trapped, helpless, caught in the dilemma of feeling, “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know.”

“Lord, have mercy,” “Christ is reviled,” and now “forever scourged” in Rouault’s litany. While a specific historical context spurred Rouault to create these images, his method of connecting with the inner realities opens them up to general archetypes, to common human experiences. While we may consider the violence of war as the scourging of Christ, we may also consider the violence done to ourselves in the internal war that many of us fight “forever.”

As with women trapped in domestic violence, relationships are characterized by both a very real external war as well as an internal war. The victim feels stuck and is of course ravaged with the internal war even more than those loved ones that can see it. This stuck-ness often leads to returning over and over again, much to the dismay of loved ones. The internal war sounds like, “Is what he says true? Am I worthless? Would anyone else ever love me?”

So it is with all of us to a lesser degree, living between external violence and internal violence. Violence at its basic level is any diminishing of the basic dignity of the person.¹⁵ Rouault, in his close-up of abstracted single figures, plays with both the internal and external aspects of human experience.

Romania, 2005 - Excerpt from letter to supporters

Two of the boys arrived at the Friday evening meeting in the street with news of Robert having fallen from the fifth floor of an apartment building. It was not clear if he had committed suicide, if he had been pushed, or if it was an accident. He was alive when they took him to the hospital, but died soon after. I can't imagine what his last hours were like.

Two years before, Robert came into Lazarus House to live with us. A few months before that, he began expressing an interest in getting off the streets after having been on the streets almost three years. In the process of trying to understand his intentions and willingness to work to come off the streets, I discovered some of the complex causes for his arrival on the streets. He had learned to cope with the streets and rejection from his family by huffing a glue bag, smoking, and cutting his arms to release the anxiety that would often build up in his blood vessels.

Robert was a survivor and a victim of his own survival methods, as many of our boys were. He tended to be quiet and withdrawn. When he moved into our home, he did whatever we asked, he made small talk, enjoyed playing cards, and with a little conversation, it was obvious that he was very intelligent. He is the kind of kid who has learned to be invisible. Ironically, after only six days with us, he disappeared after telling us that he was going to the outhouse in the church courtyard. We didn't hear anything from him for a couple of months. Now he acted embarrassed. While he was with us, he had difficulty with attention and receiving affection, though he obviously enjoyed it, playing *Uno* around the dinner table and watching movies together.

I don't know yet if it was suicide or homicide, and this has left the question in my mind about whether even if it was suicide, are we all guiltless in his death. Many speak ugly things against children living on the streets. They suffer abuse and neglect; they manipulate people to get needs met and are used to being manipulated and used to meet the needs of others. The overall message these kids get from society is, "Go away, out of sight, we wish you were dead." Most people don't verbalize these things, but some are so bold. Often the most bold are the same ones that matter the most to these boys. Robert may have thought he was doing all those people a favor.

Robert was always very reluctant to talk about God, unlike many of the other boys. Often they confess to Christ and pray to get through the long nights, but Robert never tried to give any such impression. I always got the sense that he was on his own, even if his little brother was around, and I think he felt that if there was a God, He didn't do him any good anyway.

My wife and I were on a date one day in the summer before his death and ran across Robert and his brother. We caught up a little as he casually told us about being strangled, showing us the scar on his neck and about his time in the hospital. During the conversation I had the impression that he was checking in with his

parents. Even though he only stayed a week with us, he still felt a connection to us, like we knew him and he us, and that it was important that we knew certain things about him.

Though he had left, we had invited him into our lives and still had not rejected him. He had a crooked smile, bright eyes, a soft voice, and gentle presence. We will miss him.

“Lord, remember all those who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection and eternal life. Forgive all their sins committed in knowledge or ignorance. Let them enjoy Your eternal blessings in the Light of your presence; grant them peace, refreshment, fellowship with your saints, and life that never ends. Have mercy on us, for You are full of grace and love mankind. Amen.”

-- from the Eastern Orthodox Prayer Book



There seems to be no hard line between the outer scourgings and the inner ones, and the inner ones are often perhaps more deadly. In this image Rouault begs us to see all scourging, all suffering, as the suffering of Christ. When we find we have done the “scourging,” the words of King David who just sent a man to his death, “Have mercy on me, O God,” seem fitting. Rouault challenges us with the brutal, bloody reality that there is not a beating or scourging that is not felt by Christ, either inflicting pain on ourselves through denigrating self-talk or self-harm or the dehumanizing of others through words, actions, or inaction. “As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me” (Matthew 25).

GUIDED MEDITATION

Take a moment to find a place to be still and quiet. See if it feels ok to close your eyes and count 5 breaths. Check and see if you have emotional space to sit with this meditation.

How does the image of Christ “scourged” connect with your experience? Do you have shame or guilt that comes up around things you have done or not done to others? Do you feel the pain of internal self-scourging, parts that work hard to make you feel bad to protect you from further missteps? And when there are shaming parts there are parts that receive that shaming. Can you acknowledge those places, too?

Let’s start with the scourging part, the part that shames you. Can you notice any scourging part in you that directs its energy towards you or others? Can you just be curious about why this part feels it needs to do this? Are there times in your life when the harsh self-scourging part started getting more active to protect from something ever happening again, from ever feeling a certain way again? Can you appreciate the intention of the scourging part even if its strategy has felt very destructive? What would it need in order to relax and consider a new alternative to protecting you? See if you can address those things in a new way.

Can you just notice the shame-holding parts inside of you, the part that holds the pain of the inner scourging? For now, just see if you can acknowledge it and let it know you see it there. If it feels honest, send it a message that you will work to heal it when you can get to it safely.



To engage with the high intensity level audio version described in the introduction, scan the QR code or visit tinyurl.com/rouault-meditations.



Plate 4

PLATE 4: TAKE REFUGE

“Se réfugie en ton coeur, va-nu-pieds de malheur”

“Take refuge in your heart, barefooted waif of misfortune”

“Take refuge in your heart poor wanderer (or “barefooted waif of misfortune”),” says the poetic stanza connected with this piece, 4th Plate in the *Miserere* series. A person wearing a hat, carrying a burden, and coaxing a child on. The refugees radiate the warm light through the black and grey modulated tones. The child seems to be warily looking in the direction the adult is directing, fearful of what lies ahead, almost saying, “Will it be better, really?” The weight of the burden feels enormous, and to carry it for an undetermined distance, demoralizing. It is already hard enough, and now to coax a child into going on. The gaze of the child begs the viewer to wonder about what is outside the picture; the adult in motion has a foot outside of the frame. They don’t have a home in the representation of their exile. There is no rest, no peace, no security, no home.

Between 1914 when he began work on the series, and 1948 when the series was finally exhibited, Rouault must have encountered countless refugees living in France during two world wars. In them Rouault seemed to see light, illumination of all poor wanderers – and perhaps he plays with the resonance between inner and outer realities, how the actual refugee reflects in inner condition of longing for a homeland. He could have sung, “I am a poor wayfaring stranger,” the old American Spiritual in the same spirit.

Rouault recognized the spiritual or psychological truth that in some sense all humans are refugees between birth and death, between families of origin and their found families and communities; between stages of psychological and spiritual development, the transient nature of our existence seemed apparent to him. And yet, in humankind's exile there is a luminosity shining throughout the transient state. At once the image captures compassion for both the refugee wandering through the fields and towns of France seeking comfort and rest, as well as his own heart's desire for a place of belonging.

Rouault lived in this dual reality, which was also seen by Maritain in his understanding of poetry bridging two realms.¹⁶ This can be seen in a religious or spiritual way, but also through a poetic lens of bridging

macrocosm and microcosm. Modern psychology recognizes the universe outside in relationship to the universe inside.¹⁷ The ancient theology of Maximus the Confessor articulated microcosm and macrocosm.¹⁸ It could also be thought of as one reality refracted in two directions but inherently interpenetrating one another; there is not hard division.

Murmansk, Russia, 1993

A man walked by, above the arctic circle outside of Murmansk, Russia. He looked like he had come from some ways off, and I knew the 45 minutes he had to get to the bus, canvas-grey backpack bending him over as he silently walked by, twilight barely lighting his way, the Tuloma River in sight. I didn't imagine him as a refugee, but Rouault's image conjures the similar feeling of heroic feat of survival that I saw in this man's rugged face. So Rouault's wanderer seems steeled for the journey, yet complicated by the misunderstanding of the child, not understanding how to hold a vision of the unseen and exhaust oneself in its pursuit. "Seek refuge in your heart."

Romania, 2001

In the months following our miscarriage, I felt like I was wandering through a bombed-out city, hoping for a solid structure to find a new spiritual home. In the middle of my 30-minute walk to the day center where I was working was the city's Romanian Orthodox cathedral. I was feeling the weight of the burden of death and destruction in the world, now felt deeply in my own loss. It now seemed that the suffering of the poor, the refugee, the enslaved, the oppressed was amplified in my awareness. I almost tripped over a dead dog hiding under the curb. It felt like everything was dark, death and misery.

If I – a white American male, who could fly home to relative affluence at any time – felt so horrid, how much more those who suffer these things alongside structural injustice, poverty, and oppression? Nose-ground and blamed for their own suffering, how do they do it? I thought it before now, but I felt the suffering in some small way.

I stepped into the cathedral to find a mostly empty space. A priest was at the back chanting a service for the dead as part of a funeral remembrance service. I moved toward the front and found a flip-down seat to the right of the nave. The great iconostasis stood in the center front of the church, in front of the altar area rising up 40 feet, bearing a full array of icons, patron saints, Christ and the Theotokos;¹⁹ above them the 12 feasts of the church depicted the 12 apostles, the last supper, and a cross above it all. This symphony of images was all framed in a seamless, sculpted, gold-leafed

frame. The remaining walls in the vast space were covered with frescoes depicting layers of the cosmic scheme, from the great Pantocrator in the dome down to the local Romanian saints that stand practically shoulder to shoulder with the faithful who stand for services in the open space. All of this was still stunning to me, but no longer unusual.

In the backdrop of my emotionally demolished state in this light-filled space was the single voice of the priest in byzantine tone, chanting with such ease that it sounded like breathing. The quarter tones find their way back to the root, ascending, descending, winding around each other in the great echoes, old notes resonating with the newer and newer; rising, falling, creating a chorus out of a single voice. Like a bird in the eaves of a great skyscraper I sat still, blending into the side of the church. I felt spent. No youthful optimism, no notions of being able to save anyone. The dead dog I saw earlier made visible my worn-out, tired state. I was headed to work, but was struggling to face the community down the hill.

I sat for some time in that timeless space and lost myself in the spinning universe, bathed in song, in light. All at once, like the knife to the throat of a goat, it pierced me. This was the answer to the pain. This holy place bent time so that the present moments here are also the end of the story, beauty consuming everything. The ugly, distorted, death stink would be, or is, made powerless. The light comes on, darkness is defeated, love consumes the pain, it is righted. It wasn't a denial of the pain, but a taste of the end of the story in which I was not the center, my faith was unnecessary to make it come to pass; I was but a witness to a rising sun, with only the power to open my eyes and let the light flood in.

This makes it sound like it was an intellectual thing. It was the piercing of a knife – quick, sharp, decisive. This was a taste of the consummation of all things by beauty and love. “Seek Refuge in your Heart, Poor Wanderer.”



It is as if Rouault sees the human heart as an organ of hope, a place to find refuge and comfort. In the work of Internal Family Systems among other psychotherapies, we find the struggle in clients to transition from finding their peace through changing circumstances to shifting to an internal orientation. Clients often come into therapy for ideas on how to change the people around them, to seek an ally who will collude with them in the idea that the solution is to change the environment: if only people were nicer to me, if only I had the right job, if only I had married the right person. What we find is that peace comes in becoming one's own “primary caregiver,” finding one's way to meet our inner exiles, inner wanderers who have been shut out in their shame.

When we can connect with those places that hold the painful shame, the

toxicity is drained away and now there is a new way to offer our exiled parts refuge in the compassion of the core self. There is an inner homecoming of sorts that happens when these wound-holding parts of ourselves are seen and heard and welcomed by the powerful, calm, and compassionate core self. Without understanding any of the contemporary developments of clinical psychology, Rouault seemed to get, in some way, that finding home and peace is a move within the heart.

GUIDED MEDITATION

Take a moment to find a place to be still and quiet. See if it feels ok to close your eyes and count 5 breaths. Check and see if you have emotional space to sit with this meditation.

Are there parts of you that have felt like a refugee? Can you gently connect with the parts of you that have felt homeless, alone, or wandering? See what words connect with your experience and try to let go of the others. Maybe there are parts that periodically struggle to figure out who you are and where you belong?

As you identify with the poor wanderer, perhaps the adult or the child in the Rouault image, how do you feel toward that part of you? Can you make room for your compassion to see this aspect of you with gentleness? The seeking-longing-suffering on the journey part? Can you comfort this part of yourself with your own words? Something like, “Of course you feel alone and afraid, and now you are loved and accepted here as you are, you are seen and heard even in your wandering, your longing is evidence of the home waiting for you.”

What, from your compassionate wisdom, would you give this child, dragged along, not knowing the context, the bigger picture? What is that lost child needing to know from you now? Does it know you have survived up till now? See if you can just sit with this child as you would your own child giving them your presence and attention and a deep awareness of being held and seen. Can you help this child feel found in your compassionate presence now? If this connects for you, try to stay with it and not hurry away.

When this inner reflection feels complete for you, take a few moments to return your attention to your breath and to the space around you. Perhaps spend some moments reflecting on the experience and take any notes on things you would like to explore further later or insights you want to hold onto.



To engage with the high intensity level audio version described in the introduction, scan the QR code or visit tinyurl.com/rouault-meditations.