

Johannes Hartl

FIRE



IN MY HEART

*MY THRILLING JOURNEY
INTO A LIFE OF PRAYER*

Translated from the German by John David Martin

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PROLOGUE

Nothing but blackness everywhere you look. Ruins. Shattered walls claw against the sky. A bombed-out city. Smoking rubble, scorched earth. And above it a black sky thick with clouds. Black birds circle. The stench of decay and corpses. A despairing picture of hopelessness. An image of death.

Suddenly I see a small group of young people. There aren't many. Maybe seven, maybe twelve. They are standing in a circle. In the middle of the smoking rubble, in the middle of this devastation. They look weak and naive. Young, inexperienced and insignificant. But they begin to sing. They stand in the wreck of this destroyed city and they sing. The song is quiet ... and at first nothing seems to move. But then the wind begins to stir at the sound of this song. A gentle breeze rises and drives away the stench of corpses. The vultures fly off and the atmosphere appears to change. Everything is still in ruins and yet the scene is changing. Very slowly, but constantly ... and far away in the distance, the sky opens up and a stream of bright, orange light penetrates the dark, leaden cloud cover. And in the middle of the night: A song. A small, constant song that seems so insignificant and yet changes everything.

THE QUESTION

WHAT IT'S REALLY ABOUT

Somewhere in Romania, October 2012

Fields rush past and there's fire in my heart.

Forests and villages race by and I have known this fire for so long. It seems to come and go and yet it has always been there.

Was that really a donkey cart?

How am I supposed to concentrate in this car?

Back to the topic. Back to the question.

What's it all about? It's about prayer, as always. In just about everything it somehow, ultimately ends up being about prayer. It's about a question that has already driven me for so many years. What is prayer? Making contact with a transcendent God ... Is there such a thing, really? How does it work? How can a human being actually do this? Dare he, really? And does it help? Where does it start and where does it lead? Questions that have plagued me since my early youth and to which I find new answers, deeper answers, year after year. Questions that were mostly answered not through intellectual propositions but through encounters and experiences, and not infrequently while I was traveling Like now.

It's about prayer, yet again.

The old car with its worn-out suspension bumps and lumbers over the highways of Romania. Yes, it was a donkey cart with a load of light-colored hay on its load bed. Another couple of hours and I will have to answer the question, "What is prayer?" for about 1,000 people. Cotiso arranged this. He, along with his small family, spent a year with us in the Augsburg House of Prayer and now he's back here, in his home country, to unleash a movement of prayer and zeal for God. Now he's sitting behind the steering wheel and driving 70 mph on the curvy highways in the solitude of Transylvania. Two more hours. My scrawled notes in my pocket. Fire in my heart. And complete astonishment over how all this came to be.

Yes, I already know how I am going to start with these 1,000 people.

I'll tell a story. The story is mine, as it happens, and that of my friends. And yet one that is really not about me.

Why do I even talk to people? Why am I driving to Romania to speak to an audience? I grew up in Lower Bavaria in the 1980's, of all places and times. Why am I talking about prayer? What gives me the authority? Stories. Encounters and experiences during the first 34 years of my life. Stories that are all about the unbelievable. The fascinating. The shocking. Eccentric. Different. Enchanting. Shattering all categories. The existential disturbance. The breaking-in of something that is more than the world. A flare of the very radiance that is older than created light. The great mystery. The encounter with God. Prayer. That's what this book is about.

STORIES AND LIFE

Our lives are woven together out of the stories we tell. At first we think these are stories about our lives. Then, we gradually realize in retrospect that there is another story. That I am not telling the story of my life, but that someone else is playing his song on this instrument. It's his story. The old, grand story of his love and his faithfulness, that streams into my own little stories like the colorful rays of light from a prism.

The history of God is happening. It is not a lexicon, not a scientific treatise. It is drama and a love story, full of excitement, growth, sudden endings and unexpected changes. God reveals himself to his people in just such a story. And these are stories in which he continues to sing his song today. With all his major and minor chords, apparent dissonances and unexpected resolutions. His beautiful song.

THE WHOLLY OTHER

Metten, Germany, Late Summer 1988

Orange light breaks through the foliage of the Chestnut tree and the bright mid-day sun takes a siesta. The humming of a bumblebee and two cars driving past. At home I listen to Michael Jackson and the Beatles. And I am just now getting out of school.

“The Mystical reveals itself”, wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein in the penultimate point of his “Tractatus logico-philosophicus”. “The Mystical” in this case, would be the fact, that the world exists. The astonishment at the fact that there is something and not nothing instead gripped me early on. It was like that, too, that noon, with my backpack on my back. Unexpectedly and abruptly, it was there, great and powerful, filling all the room my heart had: astonishment at being.

A glance at my hand: It’s really there. That’s really me—I am. The rapidly flowing cascade of time in which reality unfolds: That is in fact all real.

The insects are still buzzing and a car drives past now and again. I stand there for several minutes and I can hardly grasp it: There is actually something. How wonderful, how anything but self-evident! The staggering astonishment over the fact that I exist and there is a world. It can’t be understood by anyone who has not felt it himself, but to him who knows it, it makes it impossible to believe the old wife’s tale that says there is nothing but the material world.

Since then the world has not become less mysterious to me. Of course, I have “studied” it. But what more, exactly, have we learned since we have given phenomena names? Do we “know about” thunder and lightning and “recognize” them only because we discovered their connection to electrical charges? A monstrous error of our time: we confuse “knowing what to call something” with “really knowing what it is.” But my heart was wounded by the great mystery early on and spoiled for the dullness of this-worldly mundanity.

To one who prays, the world becomes ever deeper and God ever greater.

AND THIS, TOO: THE HOUSE OF PRAYER

Cistercian Abbey Oberschönenfeld, Germany, 9.16.2013

I am sitting here writing this book. My gaze is drawn outward into the rainy morning and to the red and gold of the little gatekeeper’s house across from my window. I have never entered an abbey without a certain degree of reverent frisson. “But you’re the director of the House

of Prayer”, says the older nun at the gate, smiling. Yes, I am. That very House of Prayer in which there has been unceasing prayer, day and night, for almost two years to the day. Before that I had a short conversation with my friend Raphael. He’s a musician, young father and director of our night shift. With the now-legendary sentence “Midnight to 4: it’s what I’m here for” he volunteered in summer 2011 to cover the hours from midnight to 4 AM in prayer and laid the foundation for our being able to fill 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with prayer.

I am filled with awe when I see that places of prayer, even ceaseless prayer, are nothing new. We are part of a great, centuries-old tradition. And still I believe that it is precisely in our time that a new prayer movement among young people is arising. A movement of people who are on their own journeys of learning what prayer is. They go forth to learn to pray. Yes, I think that many will leave their old habits and the comfort of the mainstream in order to ask the basic questions anew. Who is God? How can I encounter him? What will this do? And I bring all these questions together in one question: What is prayer?

PERFUME

I am convinced that the return to prayer, the rediscovery of prayer is the most urgent and important concern in the world in the 21st century. I am further of the opinion that the radical, prophetic sign of unceasing day and night prayer is that which we most urgently need now. Such a statement sounds absurd, even insane, in light of the suffering in this world and in the face of the inequities calling out for drastic action in our own society.

And perhaps it is absurd and insane, too. Nevertheless, I think that the call to 24-hour-prayer is biblically sound and well-founded in the history of the church and its spirituality. But ultimately the driving motor of all of this for me personally is something quite different from a theological insight: It is my own sheer inability to live a normal life. Or to put it in more definitive terms: *HE* beguiled me with His beauty and before I knew it, I had chosen a lifestyle in which

only one thing was of any importance: knowing *Him* and living out of *Him*. Everything after that, everything that came later and which will come later still, is just the unfolding of, and continuing commentary on this mere fact: Beauty encountered me and I had to follow. Jesus, your beauty encountered me. And I have followed you ever since.

As a teenager I loved perfumes. I collected aromatic oils, perfumes and teas. I made my own mixtures and was able to enjoy the intoxicating redolence of some perfect compositions. But then I encountered another perfume. “Delightful is the fragrance of your oils ... it is right to love you”, is what the Song of Songs (1:3-4) says about Jesus. And it is true. Nothing is comparable to a direct encounter with God. His love is better than wine (Song of Songs1:2), better than all of the pleasures of this world. To a person in love, to anyone who has encountered Jesus, this truth is not a wooden doctrinal statement but knowledge drawn from experience that has proven itself a thousand times over. Jesus, your fragrance has captivated me.

And just as he filled my inner world then, when I was rumbling down Romanian streets in the late evening, and couldn't contain my joy, so he fills me still today. I follow your fragrance, Jesus, out into the great adventure. The adventurous journey into the mysterious land called prayer. And what is prayer anyway? Countless experiences in numerous places around the world paint a picture that is growing ever sharper today. And I want to tell you about these experiences here.

LIGHTNING

THE BEGINNING OF MY JOURNEY INTO PRAYER

SHE IS RADIANT

Saulkrastis, Latvia, August 2010

She's beaming from ear to ear. She just wrote "Jesus" in the sand with her feet. She is 13 and her English is broken.

I will never forget this Baltic beach. There were no artificial lights there and the sea came right up to the edge of the forest. We were sitting in the sauna with the temperature over 212 Fahrenheit when the lenses in my glasses popped out. And then we ran out into the night. The soil already turned sandy there where there were still trees. It was cold sand. But the darkness hit us more forcefully than the cold. Latvian night, only a few stars illuminating the cove. The black forest opened onto the black beach and went on to the black sea. We threw ourselves into the ice-cold waters. The sky and the sea dissolved together into a seamless black. It was a surreal feeling, swimming in an ice-cold non-space, in which up and down were identical.

I had spoken about Jesus in the last few days. The first evening had been terribly cold in the old school in Riga. Stony faces. The mistrust built up during decades of Communism seemed to strike us physically. But then, on the second day there was hesitant laughter at some of the jokes. Some people even sang along with a few songs. And then, as I had so often been allowed to experience: tears. Tears of joy. Tears of pain that one finally allowed one's self to feel. Simultaneous laughter and weeping. The touch of God.

Full of joy and utterly fatigued, my wife, Jutta, our little son David and I had returned to the village on the forested cove and now took a walk along the wild, romantic sea. Above us was a spectacle of riotous color, pink-violet-yellow as the sun sank between towers of cloud. And then we met her. Painting "Jesus" on the beach with her thirteen-year-old feet. And smiling excitedly, as only a thirteen-year-old girl can, she told me in her middle-school English that today was the

day that she had given her life to Jesus. A few years before this I had written a short book with forty spiritual reflections for forty days. At some point it got translated into Latvian. And now she stands there beaming as she shows me her copy of “Basic”. She copied the Graffiti-illustrations from the book and took the step suggested for each day. And today she gave her life to Jesus. At the age of 13. In Latvia. Full of gratitude, astonishment and wonder, I think back to the moment when God called me ...

THE EARLY CALL

God called me at an early age. After the *Sturm-und-Drang* years of the 68ers, my parents re-discovered their faith through a Bible study group and increasingly shaped our everyday family life with elements of a spiritual life. But the example of the lived Christian life, the normative measuring stick, was hidden behind the walls of a massive complex of buildings in the neighborhood. It was Christian life in the form of the Benedictine Abbey in Metten, in whose shadow I had the privilege of growing up. Admittedly, not everything that glittered in the Baroque ornamentation there was sanctified gold. And yet my young heart was imprinted with a sense of the holy, sacred and absolutely transcendent that it would never lose again. It was finally the explosive in-breaking of beauty and joy. I later found the words to describe this as “my conversion.” It wasn’t really a conversion. It was the encounter with invincible glory.

I was 14 and was looking for fun. I had grown up in a good Catholic family, was attending a monastery school and full of positive thoughts about God and the Church—except that everything that was holy was also boring and everything sinful was so fascinating. The music we listened to at the time had something forceful in it. These were the early years of Nirvana, and the first time I went to a disco I heard hits by “2 Unlimited” and “Ace of Base”. But nothing really spoke to me as deeply as the much older music of the Beatles and Cat Stevens. This scent of revolution, the dream of a completely different life ...

I got all of this early. The tendency to break out of the limits and

do my own thing goes back to my childhood. Secretly smoking in the woods started in my elementary school years; and then, at 13, new acquaintances and a new identity: I learned to play drums and started calling myself “Joey”. Being different was my new life plan. It started with clothes. First came the “normal Hippie outfit”, but the outrageous and provocative increasingly became both the means and content of my style: multiple colorful shirts on top of each other, crazy baggy trousers, multi-colored Chucks and ridiculous hats. My buddy Stephan and I hitchhiked around, slept overnight wherever we happened to be. We lied about our ages to get into bars so we could get booze and I snuck out of the house at night to go to parties. And of course: Lots of girls. The first drugs came into the mix early on. But the home-grown cannabis that was the first I got my hands on had really harmless effects. Other attempts to get high also proved ineffective. By the time others in my clique from back then had fallen deeper and deeper into drugs, God had already drawn me out of it ...

In spite of my immature escapades in this phase, there was a lot in it that pointed the way ahead. I had decided once and for all that I was going to live a “different” kind of life. I wanted to be revolutionary. I wanted to disregard conventions and not let the opinions of others become my measure of all things. An openness to anything new (I began to have an interest in eastern wisdom and Zen at the time) and trying out nearly everything already had something of the later character of a radical walk with Jesus.

At the same time something began to grow in me early on, a disappointment with everything “of the world”. Waking up after an evening of consuming insane amounts of alcohol and indulging the cheap attitude that characterized our lax treatment of girls, I began to feel increasingly empty. One of my favorite songs by the Beatles, maybe the most unconventional song they ever wrote, is the psychedelic tune “Tomorrow Never Knows”. Right in the middle of the driving beats, and the whirring, squealing sounds like those of thousands of screeching birds and the voice of John Lennon saying in a nearly recitative tone: “*Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void*”, sings John Lennon. The void: the emptiness. In fact, even the fun and funny things Stephan

and I did together and the wild parties with girls left behind an increasingly empty, flat aftertaste. There had to be more ...

OVERWHELMED BY LOVE

It happens one summer evening. And the externalities are quickly recounted and sound as unspectacular as a person who has just fallen in love talking about his first kiss. Well, yeah, it was a kiss. And? But for the one who has just fallen in love, it means everything. And MY everything happened on that evening at a Congress of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church. Not that I am glad to be there. Certainly not that I am searching for God. I'm already a Christian, anyway. Though I am also, I must confess, a willful teenager who does whatever he wants.

And on that day I don't want to listen to anything or participate in anything. During the preaching and singing, I go outside and play Frisbee with my friend Franz-Josef. Or I just sit in the last row and assume the role of a disinterested observer. That's how it was that evening.

They're all good-looking at least, especially the girls. Astonishingly normal. And yet they are so peculiar. Raised hands, ecstatic faces. They sing "praise music". And it is more out of boredom than anything else that I go to the front when the call is given. Whoever wants to receive the Holy Spirit, can come to the front and people will pray for them. Yeah, instead of just sitting around here all evening, I can go to the front and let them pray for me. Why not?

What follows will sound as unpoetic as the sentence: "I was kissed," sounds to one who's never been in love.

What follows cuts my life into two halves. Forever. What follows is something I can never doubt again and I will never be able to doubt it.

What follows is that of which I am a witness today: God kisses me.

The prayer is unspectacular, too. A young man lays his hand on my shoulder and says a couple of freely formulated sentences. At some point he says "Amen" and I walk away. I take a few steps and somehow everything is different. No vision, no trip, no ecstasy. But simply a certainty that sweeps everything else away: that is the Holy Spirit. An

endlessly sweet happiness in which the hours that follow are utterly subsumed. It's like being completely in love but so much more peaceful and so much deeper. And the absolute, total assurance that one has encountered a person. A beauty that is not of this world. I can't comprehend it. Franz-Josef experiences the same thing. We hug each other. "That's got to be the Holy Spirit", I manage to stammer, washed over by the greatest love that I have ever felt.

YET SO NEW

This experience with God was so different from everything "religious", that I knew. It was so new that I couldn't connect it to any of the standard reactions that were expected of me. This gift was so free and unearned. It had none of the character of a heavenly reward for pious behavior or a Christian performance mentality. (I hadn't done anything at all ...). It was so new, so free, so beautiful.

It was so new that I had no idea what I could do to "conserve" this experience and yet since that moment I only had one question on my mind: How could one keep this Holy Spirit forever?

Months pass.

While standing on a lonely hill outside of Peel, on the Irish Sea, I stare at the seagulls who are circling over the wild sea surrounding the Isle of Man. Martin and I are lying down on the heath philosophizing about eternity while the wind of the Irish Sea blows about us. We buy "Benson & Hedges" and drink Cinzano at parties that are only growing bleaker and bleaker. The out-of-control LSD-Trip of that party girl, friends sneaking out for quick sex in a cave, these things fail to erase the memory of the great beauty that had struck me. A longing has remained in my heart and I cannot extinguish it. The knowledge that there is something more. The knowledge that a bolt of lightning has struck me. But half a year passes before I coincidentally hear that one can "give one's life to Jesus". Yes! That's what I want to do. Maybe that's the secret.

I have never regretted this contract that I wrote in my diary while sitting in my room one Sunday afternoon: "I surrender my life to you,

wholly and completely, and you give me in return the Holy Spirit, forever, wholly and completely.” A bit bold, perhaps, but still right from my heart.

It was ultimately this day in November that had the most lasting, life-changing impact. It was less emotionally impressive than the encounter in May. But it put my life onto a course that would shape it forever. Only some time later did I learn that the experience I had then was normal for many people. They have an experience with God but don't know how to build on it. A conscious decision to follow Jesus and a daily prayer life, I gradually learned, are exactly the tools one needs to keep the fire in the heart burning. A fire that to this day has not gone out in me. And for which I am so grateful. That a fire which began so small is allowed to have effects in other countries—such as in Latvia in the life of this blond girl. She had given her life to Jesus as well, so many years later in a very different place.

ECKES EDELKIRSCH AND THE WHORE OF BABYLON

Karlstein, Germany, 12.29.93

The months following my decision for Jesus were a total adventure. Things that once just bored me to tears suddenly drew me in, while much that I had enjoyed before lost its attraction. During this time, I begin to devour the Bible and learn to play my first praise songs on the guitar and then write a few. And most of all I can't wait to tell my friends in my clique about my new experience. When it happens it's a bit disorganized, since I do not understand it so well myself. Through many nights we sit around together in the youth house and goof around. Unforgettable highs from *Eckes Edelkirsch* and the cool feeling that we were only buying Lucky Strikes nowadays (only a 14-year-old can think these things are cool ...). and listening to “Bad Religion” and “Counting Crows”. But the conversations keep coming back to faith and eventually we begin to read the Bible. I open the Revelation of St. John. I had just finished *The Lord of the Rings* and this appears to me to be the closest thing to it in genre terms. So we sit on the floor, reading about the Whore of Babylon and understanding

nothing. Nevertheless these are the first months in which I start wearing huge wooden crosses and Jesus-T-Shirts (although this didn't really make my attire any more provocative than before). Gradually I get to experience how four of my best friends surrender their lives to Jesus. We start a prayer group and write each other dozens of notes during class in which the main topic is increasingly Jesus and only Jesus. I already begin to dream about what it would look like if we could fill the movie auditorium in our school with youth who had encountered God just as radically as we had

It is all so new, so fresh, so alive. It feels like it has very little to do with what I previously associated with faith. It takes me a couple of years before I really start to grasp what treasures had already been given to me long before ...

STOKING THE FIRE

There is a gigantic difference between knowing someone and being in love with someone. To the one in love, suddenly everything about the beloved seems especially radiant. This seems to me similar to the difference between the heart of someone who sort of believes in God and someone who knows Jesus personally.

What does your personal faith life look like? Is it a family tradition for you, like it was for me? Have you ever made a conscious decision for Jesus? Or is it about time to renew a decision like that? Take a minute, put down this book, and start talking to God. You can ask him to touch your heart anew, to show himself to you. You can even consciously give your worries, cares and wishes over to him. If you want, you can even conclude a little contract with God, like I did. Our lives are well-kept in his hands. Try it.

