

## *An Evening Walk*

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In the early evening, a tall, slight youth walks alone, with unhurried determination, across the playing fields. The angled light defines his strong jaw; his lips are slightly parted; his eyes gaze reverently at the countryside before him. Although such walks have become almost a ritual, his blue eyes are brightly attentive, as though he is about to meet someone whom he might not recognize unless all of his senses are quietly alert. All around him weave the wing and song of birds.

His shadow lengthens gradually as it moves upon the grass—until he pauses. Before him are hawthorn trees laden with clusters of white blossoms. For minutes he stands still. Suddenly nearby a lark of sandy brown plumage rises, as if without effort, straight up into the evening sky, its trilled, warbling song mimicking its quickly alternating ascent, descent, and ascent. With the final falling of wing and song, the evening settles and darkens around him, the last traces of gold and red flaring in the western sky. For minutes more he remains still.

Almost thirty years later, having been a monk for over twenty of them, he would use a description of this experience to begin his autobiography, identifying this walk as “the beginning . . . of a long adventure,” the end of a “golden string” that he would wind through his lifetime into a ball, leading to “heaven’s gate”:<sup>1</sup>

I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.<sup>2</sup>



For months, even years after this experience, the young man spends a significant part of each day walking in the countryside of Sussex. He learns the names of the birds and flowers. He wanders through the hills and woods, sometimes sitting beside streams, simply watching the movement of life around him—seeing and waiting to see. At times he brings with him a book of verse, the words of those who also have seen. These walks, too, he would remember, and the quiet urgency behind them:

I took no pleasure except in this mysterious communion with nature. I felt the presence of a spirit in nature, with which I longed to be united, and every form and aspect of nature spoke to me of an invisible presence.<sup>3</sup>



Only months before his death, his tall, slight frame now bowed with age, he still remembers and draws from these experiences:

I recall that I went up into the hills and was completely alone, and a mist came over and I felt as if I was alone in the universe—a sort of total emptiness, and yet total bliss, was there. . . . [T]his was an awakening to the whole world; and in a curious way I still live back in that time. . . . It was a coming, I suppose, to maturity. I think you live out only what you experience, and then, through the rest of your life, in a way you bring out what was implicit from the beginning.<sup>4</sup>

While the countryside surrounding the ashram in South India is very different from that of Sussex in England—palms replacing hawthorns, crows more frequent than larks—nature remains for him a symbol of and “a veil before the face of God.” Lying near death in a hut so far from the scene of his early awakening, he still waits upon the unfolding of “what was implicit from the beginning.”

## *The Romantic Explorer of English Countryside*

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Alan Richard Griffiths was born on December 17, 1906 in Walton-on-Thames, England. The youngest of four children, he was christened and raised in the Church of England. After a financial crisis, the family moved to the country and near the sea to live what Griffiths remembers as “a wild, open-air life” that was for him a time “of almost unclouded happiness in spite of our poverty.”<sup>1</sup> While his father remained a somewhat detached figure in Griffiths’s life, he experienced unfailing support from, and “a relationship of total oneness” with, his mother.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting late in life upon the value of his family background, he says: “I realize more and more what a grace it was for me. I keep looking back on that and feel that the mother—and it’s not only my mother, but ‘the Mother’—is behind me all the time.”<sup>3</sup>

As a boy and later as a youth in school, he spent much time outside, especially bicycling or walking through the countryside of Sussex. His experience of nature resonated strongly with the sensibility conveyed by the English Romantic poets he began to read, especially Swinburne, Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth. Love of nature and of poetry, he would later recall, was “the whole heart of my religion,” of far greater import to him than Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

### *Immersion in Western Culture*

Griffiths was attracted at an early age to reading and to the life of ideas. His formal education was comprised of a preparatory school and then Christ’s Hospital, the grammar school where one of his later poetic and intellectual inspirers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, had studied. He describes his passionate reading of Dante, Shakespeare, and other classic

authors, as well as his early interest in socialism and Christian humanism.<sup>5</sup> By the end of his secondary education, Griffiths considered himself an ardent pacifist and socialist, clearly prejudiced against any dogma or imposed moral absolutes, and generally skeptical of Christianity. As he described the attitudes of his close friends and himself some thirty years later: “we did not believe in any authority beyond our own reason.”<sup>6</sup>

Griffiths’s appreciation of nature, combined with his rejection of much that was modern in the society around him, prompted his first lengthy trip into the countryside, an action that he later understood as “symbolic,” and indicative of “the course which my life was to follow.” His further characterization of this trip illustrates his enduring self-orientation: “I was beginning to turn consciously to nature and to seek for a more primitive way of life than that of the modern world. . . . I had the sense of belonging to an immemorial past, in comparison with which modern civilization was only a temporary excrescence.”<sup>7</sup> This identification with the past as well as his distrust of modernity become thematic in Griffiths’s self-understanding throughout his life.

It was also near the end of his school years in 1924 when Griffiths experienced his dramatic and formative opening to the presence of God in nature. What he saw and felt on his evening walk transformed his way of seeing the natural world around him and inspired a worshipful attitude toward it—a reverence that for a time would overshadow completely what then seemed like an “empty and meaningless” Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Of the enduring quality of this experience he writes:

I experienced an overwhelming emotion in the presence of nature, especially at evening. It began to wear a kind of sacramental character for me. I approached it with a sense of almost religious awe, and in the hush which comes before sunset, I felt again the presence of an unfathomable mystery. The song of the birds, the shapes of the trees, the colours of the sunset, were so many signs of this presence, which seemed to be drawing me to itself.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, this sacramental sense of nature and openness to the “unfathomable mystery” endures, even after his later reassessment of organized Christianity.

In interpreting his early experience of spiritual awakening, Griffiths speculates about the nature of the time in which he was then living. With many others during the years after the First World War, he shared a “sense of disillusionment at the apparent failure of our civilization.”<sup>10</sup> He also identified with others of the previous century, such as Wordsworth

and many of his contemporaries who, as a result of an experience of divine presence in nature, then abandoned organized religion. Left to themselves, such people like himself then had to meet the challenge "to work out one's religion for oneself."<sup>11</sup> Griffiths's further description of this challenge reveals his sense of his life's work:

For many people the very idea of God has ceased to have any meaning. It is like the survival from a half-forgotten mythology. Before it can begin to have any meaning for them they have to experience his reality in their lives. They will not be converted by words or arguments, for God is not merely an idea or a concept in philosophy; he is the very ground of existence. We have to encounter him as a fact of our existence before we can really be persuaded to believe in him.<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that, writing as a Catholic monk and priest thirty years later, Griffiths upholds the value of what others might identify as a "pagan" experience of the divine in nature. It is also important that he claims for this experience the status of grace in its role not only in his own "long adventure" and but also in his Western Christian culture's "rediscovery of religion."<sup>13</sup> Griffiths thus clearly identifies his own situation with that of his culture as a whole.

#### *Ambivalence toward Western Culture*

After a reverent exploration of the English countryside, Griffiths began his studies at Oxford in the fall of 1925. His pessimism about the evident decay in the civilization around him grew, a feeling that he saw reflected in T. S. Eliot's famous poems of that period, "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men."<sup>14</sup> Griffiths was prompted to pursue socialist and pacifist activities further, as well as to propose a new religion founded on the prophetic examples of the Romantic poets and on the experience of the divine in nature. With the help of two close friends, Hugh Waterman and Martyn Skinner, he came to formulate a philosophy of life that accepted the ability of the "poetic imagination" to see into reality and that called into question the influence of the "scientific mind." As he objected to the divorce of reason from feeling and imagination, so he condemned what he perceived as the church's separation of morality from love, and of conscience from passion.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Griffiths's social critique, his philosophy of the mind and its faculties, and his sense of religion were all interrelated even at this early stage of their formation at Oxford.

It is not surprising that Griffiths's studies while at Oxford and just afterward informed the self-discovery and spiritual search he was experiencing at the time. With the guidance of his tutor and later close friend, C. S. Lewis, Griffiths explored the breadth of Western philosophy and literature, becoming not only deeply familiar with the heritage of thought contained therein, but also identifying with the struggles of each author.<sup>16</sup> As Griffiths later recognized in writing his autobiography, through his early philosophical studies he was searching for a rational explanation of what he had experienced, and was still experiencing, as a presence in nature.<sup>17</sup> Underlying his reading of Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant, and especially Coleridge, he came to realize, was his desire to reconcile, as it were, two sides of himself: the voracious student of ideas and the lover of nature, or, the philosopher and the romantic poet. It was also at this time that Griffiths first read some of the classic texts of Eastern philosophy, specifically, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Dhammapada*, and the *Tao Te Ching*. These books, he would later reflect: "were to act as a secret ferment in my soul and to colour my thought without my knowing it."<sup>18</sup>

During his formative college period, Griffiths, again with his friends Waterman and Skinner, began to practice living in a community, set apart from the urban society whose values they had rejected. First during their vacations from Oxford and then as a full-time "experiment" beginning in 1930, the three lived in the countryside "a life primeval in its simplicity."<sup>19</sup> This experiment was undertaken in response to their deep disillusionment with their cultural milieu. Griffiths would later write that they had confronted "the disintegration of the human soul—of all human culture."<sup>20</sup>

The exploration of a spiritual order or rule, which included devotional reading and ascetic practices, especially fasting, became an important dimension of their common life. It was during this period of communal living that Griffiths also began his gradual rediscovery of Christianity and of the church. Through reading theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, through experiencing the art of Bach, Dante, and Giotto, through his correspondence with Lewis,<sup>21</sup> and through a prayerful study of the Scriptures, Griffiths began to reassess his own religious heritage and its potential role in his life, to the point of considering ordination.

The "experiment" of living in the countryside became a time when he not only practiced the values and spirituality he had formulated at Oxford, but also began to look beyond them, not only building upon that initial revelatory experience in nature, but also recognizing its limits.<sup>22</sup> Prophetically, Lewis had advised him to cease trying to recover the experience of the evening walk when God in nature was so apparent:

"You always want to recover that paradisaical experience, but you cannot. You have to go forward through the struggle, the pain, to something beyond."<sup>23</sup> After less than a year, the three friends disbanded their communal life, each pursuing divergent interests. Griffiths's path first took him home, where he began regular church attendance with his mother, and then to London for work with the poor in preparation for Holy Orders in the Church of England.

Having withdrawn from society and from its institutions, Griffiths found himself drawn to return to them in order to take the steps that would move him into a new stage of his life. This pattern of withdrawal and return is repeated in Griffiths's life as he works out his ambivalent and prophetic role toward Western cultures. Even while in the solitude of the English countryside, however, Griffiths attended to the dialogue of ideas sparked by both his experience in nature and his philosophical reflection upon it.