

Longing for God: Sundancers

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

Every July for the past seven years, my quiet corner of North Georgia has become the site of a Native American Sundance ceremony. While the rest of the nation stocks up on beer and firecrackers for the Fourth, the Sundancers arrive in cars with license plates from Florida, North Carolina, Massachusetts and Maine. They come for four days of purification followed by four days of prayer and fasting, during which many of them undergo physical trials that are hard to watch. They do this for the love of God, who has promised to meet them when they pray in this way. One of them dances for a sick wife, another for an autistic child. Some pray for their enemies and others for the healing of the earth, but on the whole they do not speak of this. They have come to dance, not to talk, and what happens to them in the Sundance arbor is all the proof they need that God hears their prayers.

This year the Sundance overlapped my two-week course in Christian mysticism at Columbia Seminary, so that I was on my way out of the driveway while everyone else was headed in. "Good-bye," I said to one of the leaders who appreciates irony, "while you're out there giving yourself to God, I'll be sitting in a classroom talking about it."

Dorothee Soelle's book *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* led me to offer the class at Columbia. What drew her to mysticism, Soelle said, was the dream of finding a form of spirituality that she was missing in German Protestantism. While she had grown up hearing the gospel of God's saving love for her, she heard nothing from preachers or theologians about what it might mean for her to love God in return. "What I was seeking had to be less dogmatic, less cerebral and encased in words, and less centered on men," she confessed. When she discovered the mystics, she found the teachers she had been looking for, who helped her move beyond "thinking" God to loving God in ways that delivered her from the deep freeze of theological abstraction.

Her book begins with Friedrich von Hügel's observation that all living religion relies on the communion of the institutional, intellectual and mystical elements of faith.

Noting that the religion with which she was most familiar seemed to have dropped the third of those balls, Soelle leaned down to pick it up. When she did, many of her friends on the Christian left worried that she would renounce activism and withdraw from the world. Instead, Soelle saw how mystics in different ages challenged the social realities of their times. From the Beguines' protofeminist movement of the 14th century to Daniel Berrigan's antiwar protests in the 20th, there was a clear current of electricity running between the mystics' direct experience of God and their prophetic witness (thus the subtitle of Soelle's book).

When I first offered a course in Christian mysticism at the college level, I discovered that most students' church history began with their own conversions. A few had studied the Protestant Reformation, but generally only enough to deem anything earlier than that "Catholic" and therefore suspect. When I assigned them a book on the Desert Fathers, one young woman bounded into the class the next day and said, "I love these guys. Why haven't I ever heard about them before?"

When I offered the class at the seminary level, the answer to her question became more apparent. She had never heard about "those guys" or any of the other mystics we studied because 1) they have a hard time putting their experience into words and that makes their orthodoxy difficult to determine, 2) they are prone to visions, raptures and other extreme behaviors that call their mental health into question and 3) they almost always come into conflict with institutional authorities whether they mean to or not, because their direct experience of God requires no mediators. While most of the prophets, Paul and Jesus himself all exhibited these characteristics, they are not features of Christian faith that are venerated in most mainline churches today. Even the prospect of hosting a weekend renewal program can raise anxiety in church leaders fearful of rifts in community.

Their fears are not all unfounded, either. Teresa of Ávila warned her sisters against the dangers of spiritual individualism and pride. John of the Cross instructed those under his care to fly from all voices or visions, which he said were much more likely to be projections of their own illusions than messages from God. Jan van Ruysbroeck taught his students the difference between the true peace of God and the counterfeit of quietism, in which a kind of sleepy contentment ambushes those who are called to active, sacrificial love. What all of these cautions take for granted, however, is that Christian community exists to support those on a direct path into God.

While that consciousness remains central in the Eastern Orthodox Church (“We are all mystics,” one Orthodox student from India declared to a Presbyterian classmate at Columbia), it can be more difficult to find in the West, where heated debates concerning the institutional and intellectual life of the church have left little fuel for the mystical dimension. Soelle’s synonym for that third sphere is “longing for God,” which may help explain why significant numbers of people are looking elsewhere for ways to follow that longing to its Source. This year there were 30 Sundancers in the arbor for the final round—the most there have ever been.