

Searching for the Mystery

By Sister Win Whelan

During my last move, a small packet of pictures showed up among the boxes. They were pictures of our family: myself as a young woman, my sister and brothers, my brother standing proudly in front of his shop that he had just opened.

I considered throwing them away, mainly because I didn't know where to put them. I probably wouldn't look at them again, and there is no one after me who would know these people. They would get thrown away anyway, eventually.

I decided to show them to my sister to see what she would say. She looked at them and said, "I can't throw them away." She put them in a dresser drawer, which was already full of the same type of old photographs.

A few days later I was talking to a friend whose husband had died a few years ago. I asked her about the wedding ring she was wearing. "What if you would take off your wedding ring?" I said. "You could possibly sell it."

She was a little annoyed with me. She said, "No, then I feel that I would lose my connection with my husband."



These two incidents got me thinking. What is this mysterious connection we feel to old pieces of paper or a piece of metal that makes us want to hang on to them? What is it about a statue of St. Francis that I have carried with me for 50 years, or a small bell that was given to me on a trip to Wales many years ago?

It's a mystery. There's a physical object, but it's more. In a way, it's proof that there's something or someone else there, too.

Carl Rahner, S.J., a theologian who was largely responsible for the shift of understanding at Vatican II, preferred to use "Holy Mystery" in place of the word "God." He believed that we know this Mystery because we experience it in our ordinary lives, and that any authentic experience can be interpreted as an experience of God.

So now I'm wondering, "Where do I experience mystery in my life, and is this mystery where God is?" Those old photos were authentic experiences. These reactions are mystery; they lift me out of my regular, ordinary life.

I love to walk through a park or a forest with its earthy smells and grasses. Somehow there is a presence there, a feeling of mystery. This may be why I like to work in photography. There is a saying among photographers, "Look for the light." In other words, look for the mystery.

In my spiritual life, I'm searching for this mystery. I look out at the sky and try to listen. During the day I search for clues. One day I happened to watch a television show on the life of Marion Anderson, a woman with a marvelous singing voice, who was not permitted to sing in Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. because she was black. Her friends arranged for her to sing standing outdoors at the Lincoln Memorial. With 75,000 people present, she began singing "My country, 'tis of thee." Tears came to my eyes and I recognized, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, how "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."