Instructor Reading Guide

Well, Paul is certainly making it difficult for everyone, including, of course, himself. He is now living near St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, MA and following the daily Trappist routine.

St. Joseph’s is a beautiful place and like Gethsemani, very worth a visit if you are interested in that sort of thing. Here’s their site, with some nice chant:  http://www.spencerabbey.org

Father Mark is his spiritual guide. After six months, at Easter, he has an unusual experience of a “huge blue ball of light” (177), and following this his spiritual life “blossomed” (184) – that is, until there appeared that “overwhelming sense of emptiness” and he found himself “sobbing,” just like his previous episode in Negril, Jamaica (187). Not a good sign! His analyst had encouraged him to choose what is “murky and unknown” over the familiar and comfortable (186) and to “listen to your feelings” (187). Father Mark tells Paul that he didn’t “try” to become a monk; it was what he wanted. “Follow your heart, Paul” (188).

What do you think of Father Mark’s advice?

Paul’s got his hands full, hasn’t he? He knows well enough that some great spiritual writers say that “blue light” experiences are not to be trusted (184). San Juan de la Cruz – John of the Cross – wrote instead of the “dark night of the soul” when the usual spiritual consolations are taken away. John himself had been imprisoned under the threats of the Spanish Inquisition; he knew something about having everything stripped away from you. What all is going on here?

Paul mentions Thomas Merton’s distinction between the “true self” and the “false self” (203). There are lots of complications with this idea, but the basic notion is that people tend to identify with their “ego” as a self that is separate from everyone else, nature, and God, and that this sense of separation is false. The truth is that there is a fundamental nonseparation, union, nonduality, and the aim of the spiritual path is a transformation whereby one sees through this false self and lives a life of love (and social justice). The Good Samaritan illustrates this, as he was able to see beyond the finite identities of “Jew” and “Samaritan” and act out of love and compassion.

The false self, by the way, would necessarily have false idea of God – an idol. The false self would think of God as separate and also as being Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc. But God is not confined to any such limitations.

The true self is part of what Etty (who was inspired by Meister Eckhart) was talking about when she experienced that “there was simply one great, meaningful whole” (209). It is this true self – the Quakers’ “Inner Light” – that enabled her to leave “the camp singing” (360). It is also what opened Sara’s eyes to holy communion and moved her to open a food pantry. This is all the same phenomenon of discovering union and acting out of that union for others.

As Paul noted, Merton said the issue is “finding out who I am” (203).
Paul marries Tracy. He fusses over not being special anymore (197). They move to Oakham, near St. Joseph’s Abbey so Paul could go to daily mass there. (Tracy is being accommodating, don’t you think? Not everyone that proposed marriage to you also wants to live near a monastery!) Later they start attending Sunday mass in Wheelwright (204).

He works on a documentary on Thomas Merton. Merton’s writings show that he had been working on his own “false self.” In his last talk, given in 1968 in Bangkok where he was accidentally electrocuted, he said, “From now on everyone must stand on his own feet…. The time for relying on structures has disappeared” (*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* 338). As Paul notes, just before that talk, of his experience at the Buddhist shrine in Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, Merton had said, “I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for” (198). Of Polonnaruwa he had written, “Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion” (*Asian Journal* 236). If we think reality as being “empty” of separation and as being a whole, and of our being able to act out of this sense of wholeness, Merton is here finding common ground between Buddhist and Christian views of what is ultimately important.

So, Paul must stand on his own feet. And he’s having a hard time of it. How about you – an easy time of it, or is it some effort?

Paul reflects that “the spiritual life is a journey into the unknown. Married life is a journey into the unknown” (198). How about just *life itself* being such a journey?

Part of his problem is that traditional Catholic tradition had seen the religious life as the highest life and did not see marriage as a “vocation.” That notion was a product of the Reformation and Martin Luther and John Calvin, both of whom married.

“I had taken the easy way, it appeared.” Does anyone think that marriage is “easier” than a single life? That’s naïve, isn’t it? Relationship, sex, job, money, bills, debt, children, one’s own aging parents – does anyone with any experience think this is *easier*? (Think of novels by John Cheever, John Updike, and Phillip Roth – scary stuff). The way to keep from having your “buttons pushed” is to stay away from relationships that would push buttons, have a communally determined routine that orders your life, and let community leaders make financial decisions for you.

In fact, if you are looking for a yoga, a stiff spiritual discipline, just try integrating spirituality and everyday life. Now *there’s* a regimen for you! We might recall that Jesus, his companions (men and women) and Paul weren’t monastics. The first martyrs weren’t executed for being isolated from society. Quite the contrary, they got in trouble *because* of their involvement with daily life, with Jesus being the prime example of this.

By the way, a cynical view of American spiritual history is this: integrating spirituality and daily life is precisely what the *Puritans* were trying to do, and they found out it was too hard so they quit and decided to make money instead!
Paul may be hung up on a traditional but false dichotomy between spiritual life and everyday life. What do you think?

By way of providing some context, in the Catholic Church, Ignatius of Loyola sought to have a spirituality that was engaged with the world – as the murdered six Jesuits in El Salvador testifies. Before him, the Dominicans and Franciscans also were active in the world. Jews and Muslims have always had an active, world-oriented spirituality.

Paul then is asked to write about Father Greer, a dying parish priest, for *The New Yorker* – a very big deal in the literary world. Greer’s active spirituality gives Paul a hint about how he himself might live (212).

He travels on assignment to Bosnia. He reflects on his love for the sights, sounds and smells of Catholicism (219). He has started to read the New Testament and thinks that much of the authoritarian aspect of the church is foreign to Jesus’ message (220-221). He finds, however, that the Franciscan monks in Mostar, like the Catholic Church there, were prejudiced against Muslims (223) and the soldiders ready to spontaneously give a Nazi salute (224).

On the contrary, in El Salvador, he’s impressed with Archbishop Oscar Romero and the Jesuits at the University of Central America. He speak with Jon Sobrino, who happened to be out of the country when his confreres were assassinated. (Sobrino was silenced by the Vatican in March 2007; his thought was considered “dangerous.”) “Christ was there among them, in the presence of these unlikely martyrs” (227).

He finds that his parish priest, Ronald Provost, has been accused of child pornography. He writes a story on this for the *New Yorker*. Cardinals Law (Boston), Bevilacqua (Philadelphia), and O’Connor (New York) declare that such events are “isolated cases” (229). Almost ten years later the *Boston Globe* would reveal that the abuse was widespread and church officials had been engaged in a coverup on a massive scale (229). (Law resigned in 2002. In 2004 Rome assigned him to an important post as archpriest of the Baslica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, with a comfortable apartment and a stipend of ca. $5,000 per month. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/handofgod/updates )

“My Catholic Church had protected the abuser and prosecuted the abused …. My Church had followed the rules, bowing to the false God of ordination” (230).

Some people believe that a “salvation club” ecclesiology (“we have a monopoly on salvation), plus a celibate male priesthood, plus the hierarchy’s ecclesiastical right to move priests where they will, combined in our culture to produce an institution that didn’t always look out for the good of the weaker members.
The US isn’t alone in this. Ireland in March 2009 published a 2,575-page report on physical, emotional, and sexual abuse on the part of Catholic institutions and with government involvement. By a 2004 agreement with the Christian Brothers — who were heavily involved in the abuses -- the names of priests involved will not be made public and no one will be shamed. (http://tinyurl.com/l9cve7).

Paul and his family move to Wilmington, North Carolina and spends some time -- three days a month -- at Mempkin Abbey in SC.

He’s dropped from the New Yorker when he’s uninterested in writing unpleasant stories about Catholics. He believes his “calling” is to be a father, husband, and writer (239).

A call to give a series of talks at the Church of the Presentation in New Jersey shows him “ordinary people given a vision that they could do great and holy things …. This was Catholicism at its best.” Here the gospel was “a liberating force to its people, a power to transform them” (244). When he returns to Wilmington, his local parish administrators seem less enthusiastic than he.

He revisits his father’s and mother’s grave in Slovakia, appreciating the faith they gave him (262).

Back in Wilmington he, as a eucharistic minister, distributes communion to the sick and invents some rubrics of his own when faced with unusual situations (267).

He’s in Rome for John Paul II’s funderal, and he’s on “Larry King Live.” He confesses that “reading the New Testament” makes him uneasy with ceremonial pomp (277).

He concludes that “marriage, children – this was my consecrated religious life, brooking no escape whatsoever, but complete immersion into the deepest of mysteries” (282).

He starts a small foundation to help Home of Hope in India. His “life grew deeper and better in spite of me. God was good enough to give me life itself” (283).

Well, what do you think? Did he manage to combine spirituality and everyday life?

A little like Etty in his mystical interest – he’s always hanging around Trappist monasteries! A little like Sara in his being moved by the Lord’s Supper and his belief that God is a God of the ordinary. He has to follow more stringent eucharistic rules than Sara, but something of Sara’s spirit is there, perhaps?

Paul himself believes in finding the “significant detail” (239). Maybe you can recall some details from his life – and yours? – that are worth discussing. Maybe when you’re not looking, God will show up!