

## **Traveling Companion: The Unconventional**

Fr. Michael Tracey

I have been a fan of writer Nancy Mairs for years. Ever since I was introduced to her writing with “Ordinary Time,” I had to read her latest “A Dynamic God: Living an Unconventional Catholic Faith.”

Nancy lives with her husband George in Tucson, Arizona. Before becoming Catholic, she was a Congregationalist. She is a liberal, a feminist and an activist who lives life carrying her own cross. “I am in fact paralyzed,” she writes, “irreversibly and against my will by multiple sclerosis. For about the first fifteen years after being diagnosed in 1972 with this chronic incurable degenerative disease of the central nervous system, I assumed that I would go on living the way my friends and colleagues were living, just with more effort. In this frame of mind, I reared my children, finished my Ph.D., taught university writing courses, wrote and published poems and essays.”

As she sits in her wheelchair, she wonders: why am I still here? What on earth am I for? Can I be said to serve any function at all? Am I still human?

As she reflects on her relationship with God, she feels compelled to ‘redeem God from the ones who hold the Holy One captive to their own system of belief.’ She says that we should not reduce God to a person having mental states like desire, anger, and retribution but seldom has a sense of humor. Instead, we should allow God to be God.

She despises the pious clichés that people say when they see her condition: “God never sends us more than we can handle.” Instead she sees that we all go through a stage of belief in the “Almighty Parent before whom we are powerless, who dispenses and withholds at will, who knows our every thought and action even when out of view and judges then, often severely. But we can go through it into a spiritual adulthood in which we recognize that God, though infinitely mysterious, is no magician, is not indeed an entity at all but rather an external unfolding in which all creation have our own parts and bear our responsibilities.”

As she reflects on her MS and people’s seemingly answer to “God’s will”, she says that “if there is anything the modern mind cannot bear, it’s the suspicion that no one is in charge. Individuals want to control their own destinies, and they expect assistance in the venture from a variety of social institutions. If a smooth course gets disrupted, someone can always be found to blame: the negligent parent, the inept school teacher, the corrupt cop, the sleazy manufacturer, the greedy lawyer, the power-hungry politician. Most would not lump God in with this unsavory assembly, but in attributing life’s accidents to Him, unconsciously they make of God a similarly remote and even inimical Other just for the reassurance that Somebody is in control.”

In her essay on “Enough is enough,” she shares some interesting observations on our desire for “more,” while we think we don’t have “enough.” She mentions that our society would unravel if we stopped believing in scarcity. She says that unless we perceive a lack, we won’t spend money to fill it. We are vulnerable to the many “I want’s” we encounter in life. “I can forgive myself these cravings,” she says, “aware that they are merely symptoms of a kind of social soul sickness rather than needs that must be filled if I am to live the ‘good life.’” She goes on to indicate that if we worry about material possessions; it is glut, not privatization that threatens our well-being.

We say that we are bombarded with messages that tell us “that whatever we have is too small, too old, too shabby, too boring.” We can’t be permitted simply to rejoice in our possessions or else we wouldn’t want more of them. ‘More’ not ‘Enough,’ is the operant word, driving the mad but not mysterious cycle of production, acquisition, disposal, replacement. God doesn’t enter this loop.” She ends by saying that we can never possess anything we cannot bear to live without. Yet people are companions on life’s journey and not possessions. Once we have loved them, we cannot relinquish them.