

I know last week was a heavy lift, so this week I am going to tell you a story. On a warm evening in rural Ohio in the summer of 1916, Eugene Exman approached his old draft horse Nell and started to harness her up.

A short and bookish sixteen-year-old, Eugene loved and trusted Nell, who was for him a model of the sort of loyalty, hard work, and silent suffering that were prized and rewarded in his hometown of Blancheater, a small farming town about thirty miles northeast of Cincinnati.

Nell heard things Eugene could not hear, sensed things he could not see. Whenever it was time to carve a cornfield into rows, Eugene would guide her while his older brother would guide the plow.

At a young age, Eugene discovered to his delight that Nell knew what to do quite well on her own, so, to this brother's annoyance, he would prop a book on her worn leather collar and bury his imagination in it while she went ably up and down the rows on her own.

On this particular evening, the boy and his horse were exhausted from another hot day in the fields. His mother had just fed Eugene a hot supper. He had fed Nell plenty of hay and water. But today there was no rest after dinner. There was a prayer meeting at Blancheater's First Baptist Church.

Eugene faithfully attended these prayer meetings because he had been encouraged to do so by his pastor, who had rightly identified him as a recruit for the ministry. He also went to church twice on Sundays and met Pastor Wooten for an hour one day each week after school to work through Paul's epistles.

On the two-mile trek into town, as the shadows deepened and the sky shape-shifted into yellows, oranges, and pinks, Eugene felt as if the wonder of God were being revealed to him. He felt his body relax as another long day of hard work slipped away.

Just short of town, on a hill on West Main Street roughly a quarter mile from the church, something startled Nell. She reared back and whinnied and stopped short. Suddenly Eugene was surrounded by a great light. He felt a charge move into him. The power moved through his skin and bones and leaped beyond. He felt himself being lifted up and out of his body. He saw the charge reach upward toward the apex of the light.

When it comes to describing what happened next, words fail. Eugene experienced a combination of a lack of understanding and a craving to understand that often accompanies such moments. He was filled with immense joy. He said, "I was lifted from my body into unimagined and indescribable glory. I was invaded by a power that obviously my body could sustain only for a brief time."

Eugene's later retellings of this experience converge on three important points. First, it was an experience of joy, not terror. Second, it was a real experience, a mystical experience, an inward experience of the presence of God. Third, it was so powerful that it left him convinced he would never doubt God again.

Following graduation from Denison College he attended the University of Chicago Divinity School. After graduation he took a job at the University of Chicago Press selling text books. Three years later he went to work for Harper & Brothers publishing as editor of the religious books catalogue.

Over his career he knew and published the books of Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Thurman, Bill Wilson, Albert Schweitzer, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith, and Paul Tillich, to name a few. He made Harper & Brothers millions of dollars and built a significant back catalogue which continues to make HarperOne, as it is now known, millions of dollars.

For years, he feared that his loyalty to "the House" was hindering his spiritual progress. His longtime friend and colleague saw that happen. She saw the compromises he made, how he subordinated his search for God to his search for the next bestseller.

Stephen Prothero, Professor of Religion in America at Boston University, concludes his ten year study of Eugene Exman: "by all measures he enjoyed an extraordinarily successful professional life. However, he failed to become the saint he felt called to be. He might have done better. He got distracted by work. He got distracted by status. He got distracted by money."

"He died a company man. He died a good man. He died an unhappy mystic and not-quite hatched saint. As the divine inevitably receded behind its customary cloak of invisibility, doubt returned. Success made him crave more success, and gradually all that craving crowded out his search for the divine."

Mystical moments emerge out of and return to mystery. Mystical moments always catch us by surprise. We cannot recreate them by force of will, we can only receive them as gift. To attempt to recreate the experience is to set our hearts (and make our bets) not on God but on a lifetime of experiences.

Mystical theology is, surprisingly, experiencing a renaissance at the moment. Uncanny experiences of the mystical sort are more common than most of us imagine; almost all human beings have them at some point in their lives. All too often, we shake our heads and explain them away.

Doubt about the reality of such moments may be as much a defense against the risks entailed in becoming a saint as anything else. Selling everything we have to know the immense joy of finding the hidden treasure, is a bet we find hard to place.