

Dag Hammarskjöld *Markings*

It was towards midnight on September 18, 1961 that Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, was killed in a plane crash near Ndola in Africa—whether by sabotage or accident, we shall probably never know—on a journey to end the civil war in the Congo.

After his death the manuscript of *Markings* was found beside his bed in his apartment on East 73rd Street in New York City. They are jottings of a spiritual diary kept for over thirty-one years, written for no eyes but his own. They were published and came as an enormous surprise. Nearly everyone had taken this international diplomat, this reserved man, who very seldom went to church and drove himself hard with a will of steel, to be an agnostic humanist dedicated to the service of mankind. As a matter of fact, he had modestly stated his fundamental faith in a broadcast when he first came to New York eight-years before. But this had been forgotten. The book sold like wildfire but, as an American bishop remarked, “Everybody owns Dag Hammarskjöld’s *Markings*. Few have read it. Few of these have understood it.” I must say, when I first read it, I couldn’t make much of it, except toward the end. It seemed a jumble. It came to life for me when I read it again alongside Henry van Dusen’s book, *Dag Hammarskjöld: a Biographical Interpretation*, which skillfully places these jottings in the context of Dag Hammarskjöld’s life. I would advise you to have these two books side by side.

He was born in 1905. His family lived in the splendour of a sixteenth century castle at Uppsala, Sweden, a university city. His grave is near to the cathedral. His ancestors on his father’s side had been chiefly soldiers and politicians; and on his mother’s side, clergy and scholars. His mother had a deep influence on him. He was brought up as a rather liberal Lutheran. At the university his faith was eroded. This kind of skepticisms is no modern thing. The difference now is that skepticism has a good press!

Dag Hammarskjöld did very well as a student. He also became a connoisseur of art and a keen mountaineer. Soon after leaving university, he went into finance and government service. His future looked “made.” Then he was elected Secretary-General of the United Nations. The challenge of this key post was for him “the greatest of blessings as well as the greatest of burdens.”* For eight years he lived a well-packed life—working at his tidy desk with seldom more than a couple of papers on it, making difficult decisions, facing tough men such as Khrushchev, traveling the world. “He was a man of quiet but incredible energy,” a colleague said, “I have never worked with anyone who seem so impervious to fatigue.”* People often say to us: “if you live at this kind of pressure, it will-steam-roller you religion out of you.” But with Dag Hammarskjöld it was precisely the opposite. It was then that his life of prayer really grew.**

I have now read *Markings* several times. Of the many things that strike me, perhaps I may highlight four:

First, the way to faith—or the way back to faith—is, for him and many like him, often a long journey. For months nothing new or illuminating turns up. I know this road myself. We feel inclined to give up the search. But then there come “moments”—moments of disclosure; we examine them carefully. But these correspond, we find, to what other searchers claim to have found. And these illuminate other experiences, sometimes what we might call “secular” experiences. They help us to look at our own lives in greater depth. These “moments” are sometimes clear and memorable but by no means always.

On this particular point Dag Hammarskjöld’s development is especially interesting. Clearly, he had a “moment,” but he didn’t know when he had had it. Only retrospectively could he realize what a breakthrough it had been; it may be so with some of us. He writes about this in a passage that is, to me, moving and clearly authentic (and remember the kind of man he was, with an analytical, critical mind.):

I don’t know Who—or what—put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life in self-surrender had a goal.

I quite realize that different people come to God in different ways, or, rather, that God finds us in different ways. But those lines are really worth pausing over. That one passage would make the book for me.

Secondly, he examined and reflected on the writings of those who claimed to have some kind of *first-hand experience* of God. Some of these men and women were the mystics. What is significant about the mystics, all are agreed, is not the strange and unusual experiences they may have had, but this contact which they claim to have with God through prayer brings a wider and deeper love to their lives. I do not think that Dag Hammarskjöld was a systematic student of the mystics. But he quoted St. John of the Cross in that first broadcast in New York. There are also passages of Eckhart in *Markings* and Thomas á Kempis from 1953 onwards. He spoke to a friend about the medieval mystics just as he was boarding the plane for his final journey and said, “Love, for them, was a surplus of power which they felt completely filled them when they began to live in self-forgetfulness.

Dag Hammarskjöld also reflected on the experience of Jesus Christ. Some people today come to their knowledge of Jesus through reading the mystics first, and it may have been so with Dag Hammarskjöld. Why not, even if it is not very logical? It was doubtless Christ’s sense of intimate fellowship with God—call it if you like, mysticism—which gave the Lord himself “the driving force and source of energy for an almost impossible mission” This heroic dedication to his mission, even to death, is what seems most to what attracted Dag Hammarskjöld to Jesus Christ.

It was their experience of God which drew Dag Hammarskjöld also to the Psalms. The later part of *Markings* is full of references to the Psalms. Almost his last entry, apart from three characteristic poems, was words from Psalm 78— “and they remembered that

God was their strength.” Many people by praying the Psalms or parts of them have come to love them and know them by heart. These familiar verses have helped to maintain their faith, and in deed, their sanity—Bonhoeffer’s in his prison cell Hammarskjöld’s on his exhausting journeys.

Thirdly, he had to do some hard thinking for himself—and this may well be so for many of us if we are to have an authentic life of prayer. “There is no formula to teach us how to arrive at maturity,” he said to some students, “and there is no grammar for the language of the inner life.” He could not take over patterns of belief from others, however intellectual or however holy they might be. He wrote about “my never abandoned effort frankly and squarely to build up a personal belief in the light of experience.” He maintained that it was honest thinking that finally brought him round to the beliefs of his early youth; in the end he recognized and “endorsed unreservedly,” he said, “those very beliefs which were once handed down to me.”

Fourthly, what is very striking to me in this diary is where his great steps toward faith and prayer come. “The years of his most rapid advances in faith and prayer were,” as van Dusen says, “precisely his years at the United Nations, years packed and overflowing with problems and intricacies of world political affairs.” Could anything be more distracting, more destructive, do you think, to a quiet, steady life of faith and prayer than the intricacies, the rivalries, the hostilities, the personal tangles in which he is caught up? But that is where prayer for Hammarskjöld deepened. He wrote: “For many of us in this era the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”

On his flight from New York to the Congo he had with him, as always on his long journeys, a pocket edition of Thomas á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, and a bookmark in it a postcard, on which was typed his oath of office as Secretary-General of the United Nations.

*These quotes are from B. Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*, Bodley Head, 1973.

**Additional highlights of Dag Hammarskjöld’s life are found in his *Wikipedia* mini-biography:

1. “He led initiatives to improve morale and organizational efficiency while seeking to make the UN more responsive to global issues. He presided over the creation of the first UN peacekeeping forces in Egypt and the Congo and personally intervened to defuse or resolve diplomatic issues.”
2. He is “the only posthumous recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.”
3. His father was the Prime Minister of Sweden from 1914 to 1917.
4. He received a doctorate in economics from Stockholm University in 1936.
5. He served as chairman of Sweden’s central bank from 1941 to 1948.
6. He was a Swedish delegate to high level post WWII international forums promoting economic cooperation.
7. He became chairman of the Swedish delegation to the UN General Assembly in 1953’
8. He was nominated by the UN Security Council for the office of Secretary-General as a compromise candidate after a deadlock over the matter, since he had the reputation as “a brilliant economist, an unobtrusive technician, and an astro-bureaucrat.” Thus, the USSR deemed him “harmless” and the U.S. State Department conceded that he was “as good as we can get.” In fact, when he was told of

his nomination, he believed it was an April Fools joke. He was not only elected by the General Assembly, but was unanimously reelected to a second term.

9. He made a point of shaking hands with as many workers as possible, eating in the cafeteria as often as possible, and relinquished the Secretary-General's private elevator for general use.
10. He spearheaded the building of a meditation room at the UN headquarters, where people can withdraw in silence, regardless of their faith, creed, or religion.
11. Many investigations of the cause of the plane crash in which he was killed have been made, with some investigations claiming that it was an accident due to pilot error, while other investigations claiming the plane was shot down by ground fire or an air attack.
12. "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commemorates the life of Hammarskjöld as a renewer of society, on the anniversary of his death, 18 September."

Source: Mark Gibbarō, *Twelve Who Prayed: 20th Century Models of Prayer*, Augsburg, 1977.