

In his book simply titled, *Colors*, John Aurelio tells an intriguing story. A certain king upon the birth of his son instructed his royal gardener to develop the most magnificent flower ever grown. This magnificent flower would one day be presented to the woman the king’s son would choose to be his bride. The royal gardener began at once. He decided that he would focus his attention on the most regal of all the flowers—the rose. His would be a rose of beauty beyond description. Over many months and years he experimented, blending his roses to create all manner of interesting blooms. The prince did not marry for a long time, so the gardener continued his work, growing old and feeble in the process. At last, the good news came. The young king had chosen a bride and the date for the royal wedding was set. The gardener was now very old, but his lifetime of experimentation paid off. He had produced the most beautiful rose ever grown. He named it the *Rainbow Rose*.

On the day of the wedding the newlyweds entered the royal garden. They made their way immediately to the rose bush the old gardener had cultivated over such a long time. The new queen came close and picked a blossom. Then she turned and faced the old gardener. But the rose she held to her face was not his magnificent *Rainbow Rose* but just a common, ordinary red rose. The old gardener was shocked and then humiliated. **But wait!** He realized why the queen had passed over his rose. She revealed the one fatal flaw of his prize rose. For you see the new queen was blind. And the rainbow rose had no scent. **To her a rose without a scent was no rose at all.**

I think Aurelio’s tale parallels the world of faith. To some believers, faith that does not include an element of *mystical experience* is no faith at all! It’s like a rose without a scent. Have you noticed how many people today seem to be hungry for an experience of the supernatural? I also think Luke’s story suggests a longing in us to go beyond the merely rational. Think about the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in contrast to the shrinking of mainline churches. I read

recently that the Assemblies of God started around 300 new churches last year. We Presbyterians are still counting how many churches we closed last year. The standard reason for Pentecostal growth is that mainline churches are too cerebral, not expressive, putting too much emphasis on the head and not enough on the heart. For some Christians, faith that doesn't include an element of *mystical experience* is no faith at all! It's like a rose without a scent. Mystical experiences are part of our faith heritage whether we acknowledge them or not. Jesus and three of his disciples go up on a mountain and the 3 disciples see Jesus' clothes become "*bright as a flash of lightning*" and a voice from the cloud says, "*This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*"

Later in the New Testament, in 2 Peter 1:17-18, Peter writes with deep feeling about his experience up on the mountain with Jesus: "*He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, **This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.** We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*" Something outside of ordinary experience had a lasting impact on Peter, James, and John. Recalling this experience years later gave them unusual courage and unusual authority to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

There's a story about a friend who wandered into George Frederick Handel's room just as he was finishing the last notes of the *Hallelujah Chorus*. He found the composer with tears streaming down his cheeks. The magnificent work lay completed on the desk in front of him. "I think," Handel explained to his friend, "I saw all heaven before me and the great God himself." Well, what are we to make of an experience such as that which Handel experienced and then reported? Is he speaking figuratively? Or did he really see heaven?

Frederick Buechner—a much respected Presbyterian pastor and writer—tells of an unusual experience. A friend of his—an Englishman—died suddenly. A short time later Buechner and his wife were staying with the man's widow overnight. In the night Buechner had a dream about his friend. He dreamed his

friend was standing in the dark guest room looking very much like himself in the navy-blue sweater and white slacks he often wore. In his dream Buechner told his friend how much he missed him and how glad he was to see him again. Then Buechner asked, “Are you really there, Dudley?” Buechner wanted to know if this was just a dream or if it was real. His friend told him he was really there. “Can you prove it?” Buechner asked. “Of course,” his friend said. Then his friend plucked a strand of wool out of his sweater and tossed it to Buechner which Buechner caught between his fingers. And then Buechner awoke.

The next morning at breakfast Buechner told the others his dream. When he finished, his wife said that she’d seen a strand of wool on the carpet as she was getting dressed. She was sure it hadn’t been there the night before. Buechner rushed upstairs to see for himself, and there it was—a little tangle of navy-blue wool. A wishful imagination or an authentic experience? What should we say about the role of experiences like this in our faith? Can they bolster our faith and the faith of others? Let me offer a few more thoughts to consider...

The first thing to be said about mystical experiences is: **Be careful.** The human brain is tricky. It can sometimes see things that do not exist. Francis Caponi, a Roman Catholic priest, is a kind of expert on apparitions of Mary and Jesus, and even Elvis Presley, that people have reported. He notes an interesting phenomenon: “These figures are discerned in pieces of toast, billboards, refrigerator rust stains, and strangely shaped vegetables.” What should we think about such things? **Be careful.** Our minds have a tendency to organize reality in a way that does not always fit the facts. You can toss a bag of marbles on the floor and, by selectively ignoring certain marbles, find almost any pattern you wish. Our eyes and our minds can play tricks on us. We can also see this tendency displayed in the obsession some Christians have with numbers.

For example, the mark of the beast in the book of the Revelation is 666. The 666 stuff can get downright ridiculous. The fact is that those three digits can be uncovered in almost anybody’s name, if you’re willing to work at it hard

enough. Caponi also says there are unscrupulous people who look for any susceptible person to manipulate for their own purposes. They often do it in the name of religion. **Be careful.** If you wonder why most Christian churches put more emphasis on being true to the historic Christian faith than on any particular subjective experience, this is why. We know feelings are subject to distortion and manipulation. It may make us seem dry and unexciting at times, but we know that when we are faithful to Scripture, we cannot be misled by passing fads or sensations. **Be careful.**

Additionally, Caponi says, **Be tolerant.** We don't know how God may choose to work in other people's lives. It's the height of arrogance for any of us to declare that God can only work in ways that we understand or that God can only be found in groups that we approve of. Most of us would be thrilled to go up on a mountain and audibly hear God's voice, but we may live a lifetime and never experience anything more than a lump in our throat or a warm assurance in our hearts. If that's all we experience, that will be enough. **Be tolerant.**

Here's the crux of the matter: **The test of faith is not MY experience or YOUR experience; but LISTENING to Jesus and DOING what he says.** "*The fruit of the Spirit,*" says Paul, "*is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Gal. 5:23). Take a walk around and look in our Sunday School classes and you will see that this is true. Does your faith make you more loving, more joyful, more humble? If it does, then no matter what your experience is, you can't be far from the kingdom.

That's the lesson from Luke's story of Jesus' Transfiguration: **LISTEN TO HIM** and the fruit of your life will do the talking. People experience God in different ways. Therefore, the test of faith is not *my* experience or *yours* but *listening to Jesus and doing what he says.* Are we bearing fruit? If we are, our faith is as valid as the three men who went with Jesus up onto the mountain and had a memorable and moving mystical experience. The key for us is exactly the same as it was for them. Three simple words: **Listen to him.** Amen.