Startling Strangeness: A Memoir

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In the international Lonergan Conference held in Mainz, Germany, in early January 2007, Mark Doorley from Villanova University gave a paper on “Spiritual Exercises in Cosmopolis.” After outlining the volatile world situation, the fragility of the arts in an increasingly technological society, and the subordination of the university to political and economic forces, he recalled Bernard Lonergan’s notion of “cosmopolis,” that dimension of human culture built on a radical commitment to intelligence. In that light, he turns to Bernard Lonergan’s *Insight* and asks “Who picks up a tome like *Insight* in the first place?” In other words, what are the personal, social and cultural conditions for picking up and reading *Insight* and accepting the invitation it offers?

I know I didn’t pick it up until I was in graduate school, a very special place indeed. I had few concerns, since I was fed, had a place to sleep and was at least notionally committed to the intellectual enterprise. The invitation was extended to me and the conditions of my existence at the time were such that self-appropriation was more probable. But I don’t think I’m the average prospective reader…Therein lies the problem, doesn’t it? If *Insight* is the kind of book that must be read in order to respond to the personal invitation it extends, how do we get people to pick the book up, and better, stay with it through the dense and frustrating initial chapters? If cosmopolis is to fulfill its role in the correction of the longer cycle of decline, it must have a way to extend the invitation of *Insight* to people.¹

Doorley’s article is an attempt to outline a way of extending that invitation. Such a way, he contends, consists first of all in personal witness to self-appropriation. Doorley provides evidence for this conclusion in his own encounters with others who have taken up this invitation.

Each person who has taken up the invitation to self-appropriation was in relationship with someone, as teacher, as confessor, as friend, as peer, who was a living witness to the authenticity that is the fruit of self-appropriation. The witness was so powerful that the person was able to overcome the inertia of the general bias of common sense to undertake the difficult and strenuous journey into a startlingly strange land.²

Doorley makes the point that such witnesses are not limited to Lonerganians, but includes all who are truly committed to the pure desire to know. He refers to Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), and to Hadot’s contention that the ancient philosophers understood philosophy as primarily a way of life, and only secondarily as a discourse about philosophical subjects. Applying Hadot’s insight to Lonergan, Doorley outlines the spiritual exercises that


would characterize the way of life that Lonergan witnesses to in *Insight*. The first of these exercises is silence.

First there is a need for silence. This is true whether one is engaged in understanding Lonergan’s metaphysics or in figuring out how to help one’s son find a job. It is in the silence of meditation that the conditions for the emergence of questions and images and insights are ideal. This silence can be accomplished on one’s deck, in the chapel, while driving the autobahn, while listening to music.

The second spiritual exercise Doorley recommends is putting one’s life honestly before another. What is necessary is that one allows one other person, one who is him or herself engaged in the life of self-appropriation, to listen to one’s story…To be open about one’s motives, one’s fears, one’s hopes, one’s decisions, makes more likely the ability to follow the demands of authenticity.

Doorley outlines other exercises as well: listening to others, attending to the present moment, controlling one’s desires, attending to the responsibilities of one’s life, etc. I have outlined Doorley’s article at some length because it has helped me to contextualize what I was doing in the book I recently published, *Startling Strangeness: Reading Lonergan’s Insight*. For there I attempt to recount my own journey to that startling and strange moment around 1967 when the reality of intelligence came home to me. For besides being an account of reading *Insight* itself and the specifics of that moment when it seemed to me “I got it,” the book is also an account of how I came to that moment, the personal, social and cultural forces that made it possible for me to pick up and read *Insight*. Doorley’s article heightened for me the values imparted to me by my family, my schooling, my friends, and even by my pre-Vatican II seminary training. For the story of any person coming to read *Insight* is the story about the formation of a horizon and the many elements that went into the formation of that horizon. In this article I will outline that formation in my own life and the specifics of wrestling with an understanding of understanding.

### 1. Constructing an Horizon

So the question is: how did it come about that I was exposed to Lonergan’s *Insight* in the first place and was, at least to some degree, open to what he was saying? To take one thread, let me point to my own Irish American roots and staunch Roman Catholic parents. Given that context, it was not surprising that I was someone who from an early age wanted to be a Catholic priest.

The early image of our parish priest, Fr. Thomas Gillick, seriously serving communion to people in our parish church of Our Lady of the Valley in Orange, New Jersey, remained with me through the years. Somehow that image touched me and I never wanted to be anything else than a Catholic priest. At the same time, especially in my teenage years, I wrestled with that calling. Celibacy was part of the package and there was no talk then of that ever changing. Perhaps it was the whole nature of “the Catholic thing” that so many others have written about, but I experienced the inner conflict in my own particular way.

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3 Doorley, 21.

And so as I entered high school in the early 1950s, for one reason or another I began to read “conversion stories” – the stories of persons such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Claire Booth Luce, Avery Dulles. I was trying to figure out why people who were not Catholic would ever in the world want to become Catholic. It seemed be quite a bit to chew off – unless there were reasons. And I was interested in those reasons. Perhaps I first began to read these stories because these were the books that were lying around our house - these were the books my mother and father were reading - and what else was there to read on a lazy summer day? But gradually I took a personal interest in them because they were stories of interesting journeys: Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain* and Father John O’Brien’s collections of conversion stories, such as *Where I Found Christ* and *The Road to Damascus*.5

Such an interest in conversions to Catholicism quite naturally drew in its wake an interest in philosophical questions: questions such as the existence of God. For if there were no God, then the ballgame was up. I have vivid memories of staying up late at night with my friends in the Seton Hall University dormitory wrestling with questions about human life, about science and what its implications were, and about the proofs for the existence of God.

Consequently, on finally being exposed to formal philosophy when I entered the seminary in 1958, I was happy to be exposed, not only to neo-scholastic philosophy with its overtones of a manualist memorized “system,” but also to the quite challenging historical and philosophical writings of two lay Catholic philosophers, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. One of our professors, Monsignor Joseph Przezdziecki had studied with Gilson in Toronto. Gilson’s was a dogmatic realism with a tremendous resistance to anything that smelled of Kant or German idealism. I have a vivid memory of walking back from philosophy class one day and saying to a friend: “You’re over there; I’m here; I see you there – that’s realism!”

At the same time, this philosophical exposure was complemented by a literary exposure to the writers of the Catholic literary revival of the mid-twentieth century, especially the French Catholic writers, Leon Bloy, Georges Bernanos, Charles Peguy, Paul Claudel and Francois Mauriac.

My university years, then, exposed me to the intellectual pattern of experience, that is, to spending long hours exposed to closely reasoned texts. Even the pre-Vatican II seminary, with its rigid schedule and even rigid philosophical writings, provided me with extended exposure to some very fine writers. No wonder the English philosopher, Anthony Kenny, wrote of his time in the Catholic seminary in England as the best educational experience he had ever had: “I have never since been as well read, in the sense of retaining so much literature in my head at the same time.”6


Among the 300 or so students in our seminary in New Jersey at the time, there were many who were similarly brilliant, and they influenced the rest of us. Even in spite of The Index of Forbidden Books then in effect among Catholics – and symbolized by “the cage” in the library where these books were kept – still something new was happening. The reading of many of the bright students in the seminary was both deep and extensive. Even Gilson represented a new approach to Saint Thomas Aquinas, a new historical consciousness that was undermining facile neo-scholastic interpretations and overtaking the classicism and rigidity that found expression in many dimensions of Catholic life. There was a yearning to move beyond a “ghetto Catholicism” and to engage the world on its own terms.

Throughout this time in the seminary habits were being formed – habits that Mark Doorley pointed to in his article. One such habit was the habit of not only enduring but also of profiting from solitude. This habit was formed not only by extended periods of time in prayer but also by study: the habit of becoming familiar with the intellectual pattern of experience. In other words, even the pre-Vatican II seminary inculcated important habits, habits of learning how to learn, habits of raising issues that are long-term, habits of concentration. Are these not the disciplines of “cosmopolis?”

Another habit that began to be instilled in me in those years was the habit of beginning to be honest with other people. Doorley mentions this as another habit that contributes to cosmopolis, that is, the habit of being open and honest with at least one other person, and through the years of the seminary there was not only the sacrament of reconciliation – then called “Confession” - but also the encouragement of spiritual direction, of sharing with a priest what was going on in one’s soul. Could this also have prepared the way to encountering Insight?

Books also were in the air that encouraged “getting in touch with oneself.” I think immediately of Carl Rogers’ On Becoming a Person, a book which encouraged getting in touch with one’s feelings and learning to speak out of one’s feelings. Rogers wrote of “appropriated learnings,” that is, learnings verified in one’s own inner life.

So my narrative is of “a good Catholic boy” with decent marks, who in 1960 was sent off to study in Rome, there to meet Bernard Lonergan, who had written Insight and was saying different things about the human mind than I had learned in New Jersey. In Rome Lonergan was held in the highest esteem by the brightest students, such as David Tracy, Joseph Komonchak and Fred Lawrence. At the same time there was in the air all the ferment of the Second Vatican Council with its visionary orientation towards the world and its battles between “liberals” and “conservatives.” The exciting reading I had begun in New Jersey took a quantum leap when I arrived in Rome and the Council began. Through our years there we experienced first hand the conflict between scholastic theology and the more historically rooted “new theology” so influential in the Council.

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7 See Bernard Lonergan, “Insight Revisted,” A Second Collection (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 269: “My aim, I surmise, is parallel to Carl Rogers’ aim of inducing his clients to advert to the feeling that they experience but do not advert to, distinguish, name, identify, recognize.”
It was an exciting time and, meeting Lonergan as my teacher for courses on the Trinity and on Christology was part of the excitement. Let me insert here a short description of Lonergan by William Shea that, I believe, captures the experience.

Bernard Lonergan looked like a man who knew what he was doing and enjoyed it. In the score of times I saw him I could not take my eyes off him. That is understandable, perhaps, because he was the big man in my small world. But he was not what one would expect a great teacher to be. He had none of the sense of theatrical drama, no flash, no bamboozle, none of the Great Man aura. He had a monotonous voice; his hands shook distractingly; he looked overweight, not at all prepossessing in his physical appearance, and he had little physical grace. Oddly, then, it was a pleasure listening to him and watching him. I think it was because he was very smart and clear about what he was doing, and he did it with pleasure. In the academic world one does not often run into really smart people, though one regularly does run into intelligent and capable people. I had the conviction, both from the time I read *Insight* and from the first time I listened to him lecture and answer questions, that he was the smartest person I had run into. 8

Still, though I had Lonergan as my professor in class at the Gregorian University during two successive years – in Latin, no less - I knew that I did not “get” his speculative theology on Christ and on the Trinity. That theology involved a new and different theory of the human mind than the Gilson-influenced one I had learned in New Jersey. Besides, there was the rumor floating around that Lonergan was an “idealist” and I remember wondering about that as I sat in his class. Heaven forbid! Could anything be worse than idealism?

At the same time, kernels began to fall from the table. I remember David Tracy one day describing to me what Lonergan meant by an “intellectual emanation” – a term he employed to explain the processions within the Trinity.

In a detective story, all the clues can be present, but the detective just doesn’t get it. Then, through questioning, thought and investigation, suddenly all the pieces fall into place: he gets it! “The butler did it!” That’s an intellectual emanation!

Still, I didn’t get Lonergan’s whole theory of the human mind. It was over my head. Eventually, after my ordination to the priesthood in December of 1963, I was asked by my Archbishop to return to Rome to get a doctorate in philosophy in preparation for teaching in the seminary. It was not something I really wanted to do, since most of my classmates were now out in the world addressing the “real” problems of America’s cities. Philosophy seemed so irrelevant. Returning to Rome in 1964 and sitting in a class on scholastic cosmology precipitated in me a mild case of depression. Some priests I knew were beginning to leave the priesthood to marry. My issues did not seem to be philosophical but rather “existential.” Nevertheless, at that point David Tracy, said to me: “If you read anything, read *Insight*.” I took his advice and dedicated the next couple of years to wrestling with that book.

2. **Conflicting Philosophies Become a Conflict in Me**

So it was Lonergan in *Insight* who led me back to questions of mind, objectivity and reality – questions I had earlier encountered in a neo-scholastic context, but had since ignored. In the context of the times they were not questions that I saw as particularly relevant. Lonergan would later write about the “trap” of getting caught in merely existential reflection:

> But the very wealth of existential reflection can turn out to be a trap... Is this whole process from the nebulae through plants and animals to man, is it good, a true value, something worth while? This question can be answered affirmatively, if and only if one acknowledges God’s existence, his omnipotence, and his goodness...It is, then, no accident that a theater of the absurd, a literature of the absurd, and philosophies of the absurd flourish in a culture in which there are theologians to proclaim that God is dead. But that absurdity and that death have their roots in a new neglect of the subject, a new truncation, a new immanentism. In the name of phenomenology, of existential self-understanding, of human encounter, of salvation history, there are those that resentfully and disdainfully brush aside the old questions of cognitional theory, epistemology, metaphysics. I have no doubt, I never did doubt, that the old answers were defective. But to reject the questions as well is to refuse to know what one is doing when one is knowing...; it is to refuse to know why doing that is knowing; it is to refuse to set up a basic semantics by concluding what one knows when one does it. That threefold refusal is worse than mere neglect of the subject, and it generates a far more radical truncation. It is that truncation that we experience today not only without but within the Church, when we find that the conditions of the possibility of significant dialogue are not grasped, when the distinction between revealed religion and myth is blurred, when the possibility of objective knowledge of God’s existence and of his goodness is denied.9

And so, invited by others, I began to read *Insight*; and I did so very intensely. I also met with other students who were also struggling to read *Insight* at the time. We formed a community around that book.

At the same time I undertook to write a dissertation on the philosophy of art of Susanne K. Langer.10 Lonergan had been positively influenced by Langer’s work on art and it was on that work that I focused. Soon afterwards, Langer published a new work, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, Volume One*, and after reading and re-reading that work, I made what was to me a disorienting discovery. I discovered that Langer’s was a naturalistic view of human knowing and human life. In that work Langer reduces all “higher” human intellectual activities, including insight, to imagination, imagination to feelings and feelings to electro-chemical events.11 And all

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10 The following represents a reworking of a previous account; see Richard Liddy, “‘A Shower of Insights’: Autobiography and Intellectual Conversion,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, Volume 21, n. 2 (Fall 2003 – © 2004), 125-143.

of these positions cohered with her basic view of human knowing. For Langer knowing is a bi-polar activity in which the “concepts” of scientific or philosophical thinking are the subjective pole, “matter” is the objective pole, and some type of vision or “looking” is the mediating activity. Thus we "see" forms of feeling in works of art; and in metaphorical activity we "see one thing in another," life in the candle flame, death in sleep, etc. This, she asserts, is the basis of all "higher" differentiated activity.  

Langer represented the whole naturalistic tradition in philosophy, a tradition carried on with gusto in the contemporary world by such writers as Richard Dawkins in *The God Illusion* and Daniel Dennett in *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. As Langer wrote:

> That man is an animal I certainly believe; and also that he has no supernatural essence, "soul" or "mind-stuff," enclosed in his skin. He is an organism, his substance is chemical, and what he does, suffers, or knows, is just what this sort of chemical structure may do, suffer, or know. When the structure goes to pieces, it never does, suffers, or knows anything again.  

This was a view that obviously conflicted with my religious convictions as a young Catholic priest. But I was also a philosopher and I had to ask how things stood philosophically. For Langer was an esteemed author - her books on the philosophy of art are still published by Harvard University Press. The upshot was that conflicting philosophies became a conflict in me.  

I remember one evening in particular. I was studying in my room sometime in the spring of 1967 as twilight spread over the city of Rome. I remember saying to myself quite clearly:

> Who’s right here? - Lonergan or Langer? Both can't be right - between them there's a basic conflict about the human person, the human mind, indeed about reality.

And I questioned my own motivation:

> If you come down on Lonergan's side, is that because he's a religious, a Jesuit priest, and you yourself are a life-long Catholic and a priest as well?"

I could admit all these underlying motivations that might incline me toward a more religiously amenable answer. But the question itself was not directly a religious one. It was a question of fact. What were the facts? What was the truth about the human mind? In fact, it was a question about what I was doing then and there. It was a question whose answer I could find only within the operations of my own mind.

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Previously in philosophy courses and in my own reading I had learned many opinions about the mind and about the human person. I had learned what the great philosophers had said. But their sayings and opinions had passed through my own mind and on to test papers without connecting with my own basic self-knowledge. I could regurgitate their various positions, but my own opinions were not rooted. They were vulnerable to basic challenges. The challenge I faced that evening in Rome was the challenge of modern naturalism.

In some ways naturalism with its empiricist emphasis was easy to understand - or at least to imagine. Its emphasis on sensation and imagination was rather obvious: the “blooming buzzing confusion” of sense experiences linked together by associative habits. Easy to understand also were the emphases of the other philosophies I found rolling around within me: the traditional scholasticism I had been taught, with its “intuition of being;” Immanuel Kant’s emphasis on the knowing subject who cannot intellectually get to “things in themselves;” and the various existentialist writers who seemed to say, “A pox on all your houses - what counts are your own personal decisions!”

Yet the study of all these philosophies was very important for me. For they each represented people taking a stand. All represented a challenge to come to a decision about myself and my own foundations. I was twenty-eight years old and as a philosopher - a person asking deeper questions about my self and reality - I needed to make some basic decisions on the meaning of “mind” and “reality.” Lonergan once wrote about these foundations:

> It is a decision about whom and what you are for and, again, whom and what you are against. It is a decision illuminated by the manifold possibilities exhibited in dialectic. It is a fully conscious decision about one's horizon, one's outlook, one's world-view.\(^\text{14}\)

In other words, you had to know something about these possible worldviews before you could take a stand in their regard, either positively or negatively. I had been reading around in ancient and modern philosophy during the previous ten years and the major emphases of these various schools were not too difficult to understand.

In contrast, Lonergan’s position was difficult to understand. I sensed that he was on to something in his emphasis on understanding. Still, he seemed to imply that there was a residual materialism, or "naive realism," even in someone like myself who had studied many years of Catholic philosophy and theology. I sensed that he was calling for a change in me if I were to truly understand what he was talking about.

I knew I had learned something from the study of *Insight*. I had learned something about understanding in mathematics, in science and in common sense. But to a great extent what I had learned had been what Lonergan had written. And as Jesus said to Peter when he recounted various opinions circulating about him, “But who do you say that I am?” Similarly I felt the question in me,

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But who do you say that you are, Dick Liddy? What do you say about your own knowing? your own mind? your own self?

This inner dialogue was not about what Lonergan or anyone else had said about knowing; it was rather about what I was coming to know about my own knowing. And the evidence for answering these questions was to be found within me. It was a question of putting the book down and “thinking” about the meaning of the book.

Intellectual habit is not possession of the book but freedom from the book. It is the birth and life in us of the light and evidence by which we operate on our own.

And so I kept asking the question “Is this all true?” In particular, is it true, as Lonergan states, that understanding is distinct from imagination? Is my understanding distinct from my imagination? Couldn’t understanding be just another form of imagination? Couldn’t I imagine that? And I played many mental games - trying to imagine and re-conceive other explanations for the structure of my own mind. Again and again I said to myself that all the later elements in Lonergan’s book, including the existence of God, depended on the correctness of the earlier analyses of insight. And so, as I read the second half of Insight I could not help repeating to myself:

Is the understanding of understanding in the first part of Insight correct? The circle, for example, is Lonergan correct on that? Is there a specific act called ‘understanding’ or is understanding just some kind of ‘imagining?’

And my imagination threw up on the screen of my mind all kinds of conflicting images and questions: “Perhaps what I call ‘understanding’ is just a kind of imagination - for example, an imagining of perfectly equal radii?” But that did not seem to make sense. The fact that mathematics deals with intelligibilities that can be symbolized but not represented seemed strong evidence for a distinct intellectual level of consciousness.

But what was this intellectual level? Where was it? “What did it look like?”

Beneath the surface of my mind there percolated an unease that I formulated in the question, “Where is this act?” I was not sure I had a real “handle” on it. I was not sure what insight was like. I was not sure I could situate it clearly within my own consciousness. I was not sure I “had” it. In some real way, I was looking for something with a label on it:

“THIS IS THE ACT OF INSIGHT!”

But the reality turned out to be more subtle.

3. The Shower Experience

And that is when I remember having an "Archimedean experience." It was late one afternoon in Rome in the spring of 1967 and I had been working on this stuff for most of the day. So I

decided to take a shower. Like Archimedes, I was relaxing in the water as various questions and images went through my head. Then, at one point I asked myself: “Where is this act of insight?” And then it hit me:

*You’re asking the wrong question!* Look at the question you're asking! You're asking a question that cannot be answered! You’re asking "where?" and that’s your attempt to visualize what can't be visualized! You're attempting to imagine what of its nature goes beyond imagination. Indeed, you can be aware of insight; you can understand it in its relationships with other cognitional acts; you can come to judge that understanding of understanding as correct; but you *can't see it!* The very question you’re asking is formulated in imaginative and visual terms and, as such, can't be answered!

That is my formulation now of what I said to myself that afternoon some forty ago. Perhaps my words then were somewhat different; and certainly my acts of insight were quite global; but that was the substance of it. I realized that the question I was asking, that I spontaneously felt could be answered, could not be answered. I was in the shower, in a room, in a place that could be designated spatially. But an explanatory understanding of my own understanding could not be so designated.

And *that* I was understanding!

And that’s why that moment that afternoon forty years ago stands out in my mind today. It is part of my “psychological present.”

An important dimension of my insight was the discovery that I *had not understood.* For a long time while reading *Insight* I had been bothered by an underlying question, a question I hardly realized was in me – a question that was literally part of me, part of “my guts.” In the shower it found expression in “Where is this act of insight?” But the question had been rolling around within me before that as an uneasy feeling, an unsure-ness that I really had a handle on what I was looking for. And the question that flowed from that uneasy feeling was a question that as such could not be answered. Perhaps a neurobiologist could indicate certain areas of the brain stimulated by such reflective thinking, but the insight itself cannot be explained by such underlying conditions.17

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16. Someone once told me of one of Rollo May’s books on human creativity where he specifically speaks of “the shower experience.” I have not been able of locate the reference. Someone else referred to “the three ‘b’s’ - the bed, the bath and the bus - all places in which you’re relaxed and insights can emerge.

17. As Lonergan replied when asked about the biological basis of thought: “The biological basis of thought, I should say, is like the rubber-tire basis of the motor car. It conditions and sets limits to functioning, but under the conditions and within the limits the driver directs operations.” A *Second Collection*, 35.
Such was the nature of my wrestling. I was wrestling with the feeling I had that everything can be analyzed from an “already out there now” perspective. It was a skill or schema I had developed: to ask what something looks like, where it is located, what it feels like. And that was the discovery I made: that these were the wrong questions. It was an inverse insight.

Such was the key move in my mind from a naïve to a critical realism: with the fear of idealism thrown in for the ride. If insight was not “already out there now,” maybe it was “already in here now?” And this was an issue that faced me in the aftermath of my experience in the shower. For I kept asking myself, Is this real? Am I on to anything here? Or am I just getting wrapped up in my own mind? Am I becoming an idealist? Does this insistence on the intellectual pattern of consciousness lose contact with reality? Or is it the way we primarily know reality? Lonergan himself noted that in his early years of philosophical study he himself had experienced this fear that he was becoming an idealist. I found that same fear in myself. I feared that somehow I was getting too wrapped up in my own “self” and never reaching reality “out there.”

But then I realized that idealism itself involved the same imaginative “inner-outer” schema on reality that had bedeviled my efforts to figure out “where” insight was. Idealism still holds on to the idea of reality as “out there,” and since we do not have any intellectual intuition, any intellectual “look,” we consequently cannot get “out there” to “the really real.” We are, as it were, trapped in our own minds.

If, on the other hand, reality is mediated by reasonable judgment about what we have understood, rooted in a grasp of the sufficiency of the evidence, then we attain reality through the truth of reasonable judgments. And such a reality-ordered process becomes a critical realism through the process of self-appropriation. The breakthrough to understanding the un-imaginability of insight was intimately connected to the breakthrough to a critically realist philosophy.

4. The Testimony of Others

In my book I include a number of anecdotal testimonies from others who have told me about similar experiences in reading Insight. I have recounted these stories as (in Doorley’s terms) “witnesses” to the “startling strangeness” that Lonergan claimed will mark the life of one who has come to understand understanding. There was, for example, the professor of philosophy who told me of an afternoon, many years ago, when he was reading Insight on the grounds of the North American College in Rome. “I was absolutely carried away by it,” he said. “When I walked up to my room that afternoon after reading Insight, everything was different -

18. In Topics in Education Lonergan presents the work of Jean Piaget on the infant’s employment of groups of operations by which “the already out there now” becomes the criterion of reality. See Bernard Lonergan, CWL, Volume 10, Topics in Education (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 169. This is an excellent contrast between early development to “the already out there now real” as a primal criterion of reality and its later stubborn persistence as the only criterion of reality.


Another student of *Insight* remembers attending the horse-races at a track in Dublin. “In the middle of the races,” he said,

I began to think of the meaning of “reality.” Then it hit me - like a ton of bricks. I realized I understood what Lonergan was talking about! - and it was quite different from the ordinary meaning of “reality.” I can remember that moment quite vividly.

Another person told me he remembered very distinctly the turning point in his own journey. “I was in a class at Boston University,” he said.

The professor was a very open man, encouraging us in our own opinions, while at the same time going on about his own. And his opinions on philosophy and human knowing were quite distinct from what *Insight* held. I remember saying to myself: “I know what this man is saying and what he holds; and I know he’s wrong. I know I hold a whole set of positions on consciousness and insight that are directly opposed to what he’s teaching.” Perhaps it was his teaching itself that so set up for me the contrast. I can remember that moment years back quite clearly. It was a key moment in my own self-knowledge.

And Philip McShane writes about his experience, not while reading *Insight*, but while reading Lonergan’s articles, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Saint Thomas*.

I recall vividly the strangeness of the beginning of my own escape, and the concomitant shift in sensibility, when I was 26, with four years of mathematical science and two years of philosophy behind me. The pivotal text, oddly enough, was not *Insight*, but the fifth element in the general notion of inner word in the first of the *Verbum* articles. Since then I have found it easy to keep track of the few students I have helped towards and into that strangeness, and I have no doubt that Maslow’s statistic, “less than 1% of adults grow,” holds sway for the population of philosophers with regard to this bridge. The statistic can change only if we seriously and incarnately make this bridge a topic, and the difficulty of its crossing a topic.21

Elsewhere, McShane writes about arriving at “a serious explanatory concept,” such as one arrives at in studying *Insight*.

What, then, do I mean by a concept, a serious explanatory concept, such as we struggle towards in these chapters? I can perhaps appeal to the description that I regularly, in the past twenty years, invited my students of philosophy to ponder over. There are two characteristics of a serious explanatory concept. You will remember the weeks, months, even years, that you spent – with feats of curiosity, not feats of memory – in struggling towards it. You will be able, even years later, to speak of it illuminatingly, through illustrations, for perhaps ten hours. Maybe

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you are led by this to suspect that serious explanatory concepts are rare achievements? And certainly they are not passed on from generation to generation in compact learned nuggets.  

There is also the testimony of the Jesuit, William Ryan, whose breakthrough, like my own, took place in relation to Lonergan’s favorite example, the circle.

Then in 1963 I went to Europe for Tertianship and for doctoral studies in philosophy at Louvain. In Louvain, for the first time, I read Father Lonergan’s *Insight* from cover to cover. Shortly afterwards, I ran into a quaint phrase of his: “An insight into a circle has no bumps or dents.” I was astonished. I grasped cleanly that an insight is not just more sensing, like staring at the bumps and dents on a wheel. And finally I grasped that by having insights and recognizing them, one enters into the world of Lonergan’s method, the world where sensing and insights perform such radically disparate functions.

Another of Lonergan’s students, Giovanni Sala recounts how important Lonergan’s insistence on judgment was for his own breakthrough. For years he had studied Kant’s philosophy and was convinced, along with most neo-scholastic philosophers, that the only guarantor of the transcendence and objectivity of our knowledge was some kind of intellectual intuition. His encounter with Lonergan as his teacher in Rome, however, threatened his naïve realism.

It was therefore a cause of amazement and confusion to me when later, as a student at the Gregorian University, I heard Lonergan speaking repeatedly of the “*vim judicii existentials quo per verum judicium cognoscitur existens*” [the power of an existential judgment by which through a true judgment an existent is known] or of “*verum absolute positum quo innotescit ens*” [an absolutely posited truth by which being is known]. My first reading of *Insight* could not restore firm ground under my feet after Lonergan had called my realism into question, a realism that rested on nothing other than the principle of intuition! For years I remained stranded in midstream, so to speak, until gradually the indirect approach through the study of theology, a few seminars with Lonergan…the study of the articles “The Concept of *Verbum* in the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas” (which gave me an easier access to Lonergan’s thought because of my neo-scholastic background), and another round of wrestling with *Insight*, revealed to me the truth, indeed the extreme simplicity, of the thesis that knowledge of reality occurs through the performance of our intentionality.

Sala sums up his discovery:

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The surprising thing about this insight, which came to me at the end of a long search and in which the scales of intuitionism fell from my eyes, was that, in spite of all the complex particular forms and instances of human knowledge in all its various branches, the core of this doctrine proved to have a disarming simplicity: we know reality because and to the extent that we attentively observe the relevant data of experience, bring the data to an intelligible unity, and take the trouble of weighing the evidence for and against our interpretation of the data with intellectual honesty. Every human being who wants to know how it stands with reality spontaneously does precisely this! This same insight made it possible for me to see the chasm that intuitionism of every sort sets up between the cognitive acts which we de facto perform and the postulated intuition of the fact itself, whether it be Kant’s merely sensible intuition or the neo-scholastic intellectual intuition.

Finally, Patrick Byrne in a talk in the 1999 Lonergan Workshop recounted his own experience of this transformation and the accompanying feelings. He spoke about it as “the incredible lightness of being.” “Everything looked different,” he said. “In fact, I was not sure the stairs beneath me would hold my weight.” Even simple equations, such as $2 + 5 = 10 - 3$ were wonderful and mysterious – not to mention other instances of the mysteriousness of the world of theory.

“The complete and intrinsic intelligibility of being” – Say it early and often - It awakens something in you and is the key to the general knowledge of God.

Byrne goes on to say that “space and time fall away, that is, spatialness and temporalness in the ordinary sense of ‘substance,’ that is “hard stuff pushing on hard stuff.”

The unbearable lightness of being is the intrinsic relatedness of everything to everything…

5. Conclusion: Community and Cosmopolis

I began this article by recalling Mark Doorley’s article, “Spiritual Exercises in Cosmopolis,” especially the spiritual exercises of witness, silence and sharing the depths of one’s being with others. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of those practices in my own journey to the experience of “startling strangeness.” I came to that experience through the witness of others and that experience itself led to the formation of new community. This is the story I tell in my book; others have similar stories, but each unique.

Lonergan remarked in Method in Theology that such an experience is not enough: it has to be applied to all areas of culture and of life – and for that community is necessary. The key thing is to keep taking it seriously and to allow it to affect all one’s thinking and acting. As Peter Berger wrote of religious conversion, to have such a conversion is one thing; to continue to take it seriously is something else again. And that can only take place in the context of community.

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It is only within the religious community, the *ecclesia*, that the conversion can be effectively maintained as plausible. This is not to deny that conversion may antedate affiliation with the community ... But this is not the point. To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality. In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he would remain Paul only in the context of the Christian community that recognized him as such and confirmed the "new being" in which he now located this identity.26

“*The indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality:*” this is a function of community. The small Lonergan community in Rome that was so helpful to me when I was first reading *Insight*; and the Lonergan community through the years that has helped me to continue to take the invitation of *Insight* seriously and to catch a glimmer of its far-reaching implications. As Doorley brought out in his article, the pure desire to know heads toward sharing one’s life with others in community; it also leads to creating citizens of Cosmopolis.

Nor is this unrelated to the question of God. Somewhere Lonergan remarks that through this breakthrough to one’s own mind “You’re almost all the way home,” that is, home to the question of God and to identifying God’s solution to the problem of human living. Speaking about the search for "the unknown god" among the ancients, particularly Plato and Aristotle, Lonergan remarked:

> Insofar as they reached the unknown god, they were already within the horizon of being, of being that is immaterial beyond all knowledge. And you have the long-winded approach in *Insight* because people today do not know about the unknown god. You have to open up their minds, let them find out what their own minds are before they can begin to be open to thinking of anything beyond this world. 27
