

## Conscience and Courage by Richard Whittaker

Interview: Lee Hoinacki: Conscience and Courage

One day, browsing through the San Francisco Chronicle, I noticed the announcement of a program being put on by Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown. Among the list of topics were two evenings devoted to medieval philosophical Latin. Medieval philosophical Latin? Sure enough, that's what it said. I'd taken Latin in high school and on no account would I miss a civic program so improbable. It marked my introduction to a remarkable man, Lee Hoinacki.

Hoinacki by turns had been a Dominican priest, a professor of political science and a subsistence farmer. He's the author of four books: *El Camino*, *Stumbling Toward Justice*, *Dying Is Not Death* and *The Challenge of Ivan Illich*. For decades, Hoinacki and Ivan Illich were the closest of friends.

In his Latin presentation that first evening, he made it a point to discount his own expertise. In truth though, Hoinacki is a scholar. He told us that reading St. Thomas Aquinas in Latin is much clearer than reading him in English. And while he downplayed his accomplishments, it was soon clear that I was listening to a man of rare qualities. As he led us through the Dative and Ablative, the Vocative and Locative, he wove in personal anecdotes and fascinating philosophical ramblings from the 12th century.

During his stay in Oakland, Hoinacki was persuaded by Illich, Jerry Brown and other members of the symposium faculty to teach an 8 a.m. Latin class. The class, free and open to all, was a big hit during the entire six-week session.

Hoinacki and I met to talk one afternoon near the end of the symposium in Mayor Brown's well stocked library.

Richard Whittaker: As I've listened to these stories from your life the one thing that strikes me most is that there's been a genuine search in your life.

Lee Hoinacki: I think that's true. I grew up in a small town. When I was in high school, I had a good time going out with my friends, going to dances—all that kind of thing. And after high school I wanted to go to college which was unusual in our town, and I was the first person in our family to go to college. Also I wanted to get out of this little town, Lincoln Illinois. But after high school, I decided I was too immature to go to college. I thought, this is something serious and I've been doing nothing but having a good time. The original G-I bill was in effect and I knew I could go into the service. There was a poster that said "Join The Marine Corps and See the World." I thought, well, maybe I'll do that. So I signed up and they sent me to China immediately. I had just turned 18. I'd never traveled more than thirty miles. Also, I had a couple of other requirements. I didn't want to accept a nickel from my father, and I wanted to be able to study full-time. And by cutting expenses I found I could live very easily on the G-I bill. So there was a kind of searching there. From then on it was more books and ideas, searching through a lot of reading and certain friends I made.

RW: I've been struck by some of the decisions you've made. You were in a doctoral program at UCLA when you left and moved to Venezuela. Had you completed your doctorate?

Hoinacki: I still had to write the dissertation. Within the first year of the university job I took when I got back, I wrote the dissertation.

RW: Okay. I was struck by the fact that your decision to leave the U.S. was a moral decision. This had something to do, I believe, with your seeing some of the Viet Nam war protests, etc.

Hoinacki: Seeing what the police were doing, and what the protesters were doing, was just a catalyst. I'd been out of the country for some years. I knew there was such a thing as the Viet Nam war, but seeing these things made me wonder, what's going on? Why are they protesting? This was 1967, 1968 when I came back to this country from South America. So I started looking at this question of the war. Very quickly I came to the conclusion it was an unjust war, so totally unjust, that after a lot of reasoning, I came to the conclusion that I could not live in a country pursuing such a policy. I just couldn't do it. I felt a protest wasn't enough. One had to say something stronger, and the strongest thing would be to exile myself from my own country. But this was not because of any police actions. Later on I came to the conclusion that it is very wrong to accuse the police of something. They are only instruments of those in power and are stuck in between.

RW: At any rate you left the country and went to Venezuela. There were a couple of people there who had an impact on your thinking.

Hoinacki: One a Spaniard, one an American. I met many Spaniards in Latin America who had gone into exile because they had been on the losing side in the Spanish civil war. They left for various reasons, fearing for their lives, not wanting to go to jail, or feeling they just couldn't live under the regime of Franco. One of them, Pedro Grases, went to Venezuela. He's still alive, very old. At that time in 1970-71, when I met him, he was very prestigious, the most learned and prominent historian in the country. In his private library he had gathered all the primary and secondary documents, as much as that was possible, for studying the history of Venezuela. His house was large and he had a separate structure on the grounds which housed his library.

I could talk a lot about this man, but it comes down to one conversation. We were alone in his library. He was expressing his personal feelings about his work and his life and so forth. He had been in Venezuela for thirty or forty years by this time, and he said to me, "You see my library, and you know what I've done. You see my life's work. But who is going to carry on this work? My children are not interested in this kind of academic study. They're interested in other things. I haven't found anyone in Venezuela who wants to carry on this work."

He didn't express it in so many words, but I felt this man looked on his life as a kind of failure. He hadn't found anyone interested enough in their own history to carry on his work and he thought that the history of a people is so important for them. Venezuela is a very peculiar country, but I don't need to go into that.

He was very European in terms of taking on protégés, students, disciples, and he had people who had come there to live and work with him like Raphael Caldera who became president of Venezuela.

Part of my dissertation had to do with studying Caldera and his friends. Caldera was a man who recognized immediately what Pedro Grases was doing and his importance to the country, his importance to the future of that nation. Caldera apprenticed himself to Grases as a student and lived there and worked with him. I don't know how many years Caldera did that, but Caldera, of course, had a vocation to be a politician, and at a certain point he left Grases to enter politics. So there was Grases after some thirty years in Venezuela with a sense of failure.

Then I met an American, George Hall. George worked for the CREOLE foundation. At that time Venezuela had not yet nationalized their oil. It was owned by the Americans who had established the CREOLE Foundation to do things in Venezuela along the same lines as the Ford Foundation, to give money for educational and cultural projects, etc. George Hall was head of the foundation. He had been working in Venezuela for twenty or thirty years doing this, and I got to know him pretty well. I'd taken an academic research job there and part of my salary was coming from the CREOLE Foundation.

George took me to lunch one day and he talked about his life. He was getting ready to retire and return to America. George, reflecting on his life, talked about the tertulia. It's a Spanish word for which we lack an equivalent in English, but it's like a salon in which a kind of conversation and exchange takes place. These tertulias were organized by Pedro Grases and took place in his library. Pedro invited people to come in for conversation on Saturday mornings. I was also invited to come several times. At these meetings you would find leading figures of the country, an industrialist, a politician, top literary people, etc. Venezuela, in some ways, was a very insular society so that everyone "who counted" knew everyone else, and Pedro was able to bring them together. These people would sit down together in his library and have coffee. In the sessions I went to, all those invited

were men. Women had not yet been included in that level of social, intellectual intercourse in Venezuela. I don't know what is going on today.

What Pedro was able to do was to establish a certain level of what we call a civic conversation, creating in his own way the germ of a civil society. You have to know all of Venezuelan history to understand that, but it would take too long to go into all that.

Okay then, the whole point of the conversation with George was this—George said, "I go to these things—now I've been in Venezuela some thirty years! I go, and at these gatherings when the conversation reaches a certain point, a certain kind of issue, a curtain drops between all the Venezuelans and myself. I can feel it. There's a quiet agreement not to discuss it any further. I've been cut out because I'm an American. Underneath everything there is a feeling: this guy is the American imperialist, etc." So he felt, after living there some twenty years, that his life was a failure even though he had dedicated his life to educational and cultural projects for Venezuela.

At that time I was 39 or 40 and it made me stop and think. I'd come with a wife and two children and although I spoke the language well and was very well received by Venezuelans—I had no difficulty entering the society because look, there I was at the very top within a few weeks with the man who was the most important man in Venezuela intellectually—but I had to ask myself, wait a minute, what am I going to do twenty or thirty years down the line? Is my life going to be like George's or Pedro's? And so I thought that perhaps I'd made a mistake. Perhaps going into a different society is not such a good thing to do. Perhaps I should rethink my position.

RW: You decided to return to this country, but when you came back you needed a job. Your advisor at UCLA, I believe, told you he could get you a job in any university in the country. Yale. Harvard. So you thought that over. You looked around at the professors who had tenure in prestigious schools and decided you didn't want that life, if I've heard you correctly. You eventually decided to take a position at one of a number of the new colleges and universities that were just springing up in that idealistic moment in the late sixties. Do I have that right?

Hoinacki: Yes.

RW: Now that's another unusual decision, not to go to some place like Harvard where you would have had a good career path all laid out. You turned your back on consciously.

Hoinacki: Yes.

RW: So you became a faculty member at this new college and seven years later, when they initiated tenure there, you received tenure. And the day after you were given tenure you quit. You sold your house, cashed in your retirement fund, and made this radical decision to investigate the question of subsistence living. So you bought some land, 40 acres at the confluence of the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers. You must have been in your mid to late forties when you bought the land.

Hoinacki: I was exactly 50 years old.

RW: A series of very atypical decisions. Remarkable decisions. This is part of why I said it seemed to me that your life has been truly a search. I realize I'm trying to cover a lot of ground here. Maybe the question is, what can you say about this propensity you have, the courage to make such unusual life decisions?

Hoinacki: Of that I don't know. You mention the word courage. That never occurred to me. I can't recall exactly what I was thinking. It seemed to me that the university was not a good place for me to be. It seemed, from the ideas I'd picked up from Illich and from the books I'd read, that there was something really quite wrong about contemporary society, contemporary life.

For example, I got a letter from Theodore Kaczynski. I correspond with him. He enclosed a copy of a letter he'd sent to someone else to show me some of his thinking. The other person had said, "I don't believe in killing people in respect to this opposition to technology." Kaczynski, in his letter, which was very carefully argued, said "I don't know how much you understand about technology, so I'd like to suggest a couple of books to you." He was very polite in his letter. The books were both by Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* and *The Autopsy of Revolution*. Since receiving that letter I often get into situations where I'm talking about Kaczynski and talking about his document. I ask if they've ever heard of these two books. Of course in the circles where I move, they've all heard of *The Technological Society*, but not a single person had ever heard of *Autopsy of Revolution*. It was one of the textbooks I gave students to read.

I had been reading things like this which were really critical of what was going on in our society. Illich, for example, in his earlier years was attacked mercilessly by Marxists, because Marxism in Europe was a very respectable intellectual position. Many intellectuals in universities were Marxists. Illich's criticisms have focused not on the owners of production, but on the mode of production. Illich understood something which Marx did not.

So I was reading these things and thinking about these matters and decided that this society is really in bad shape. The whole direction of the country, the whole way of doing things, of making things, of believing in things, the way of hoping for things, is all—to exaggerate a little bit—is all wrong. So therefore I asked, well, what is there?

Well, Illich had talked about the whole direction of modern life as what he called in a certain phrase, "a war against subsistence." What is subsistence? Is this something one just writes about in books that might have existed in some ancient time. Or is this something that has some kind of meaning today? Well, the only way to find out is to try it. You're not going to find out reading books.

RW: A very important point. Most of us are just stuffed full of these things that come into the head, but they are never tested against experience. I think it's unusual when someone does that in the ways you have. Not many people ever try that, but of course there are good reasons for that. People are just trying to get by, first of all.

Hoinacki: Right. As Thoreau pointed out in the very first pages of *Walden*, most people lead lives of quiet desperation -- trying to cope, trying to get through the day. You see this idea, which came up in America: Thank God It's Friday! I mean, what a stupid idea, in a way! It's not stupid, it's sad. But that's the real world.

RW: I have to ask how you view the acts that Kaczynski has done sending bombs through the mail to various individuals.

Hoinacki: When I first wrote to him, a rather long letter, I wrote about certain ideas that I thought were lacking in his Manifesto—I'm assuming he wrote it; he doesn't admit that to this day, but that's another story—certain ideas which were missing. I wrote it as a kind of

open letter. Friends of mine saw it. People were very much upset with me in the university where I happened to be at that moment, Penn State University, and were really extremely critical with me for having any contact with someone they considered to be a murderer. So in an introduction, I said—with respect as to whether or not this man killed somebody—if he did, then we have appropriate measures in this country for trying people accused of murder. He should be subjected to that process, and if he is convicted, he should have to serve his time. I am very strongly against capital punishment. I don't think it's fitting and proper that the state take this kind of action.

Now whether he was guilty of sin, that's only between him and God. As far as I can tell, he is a human being. Therefore I still have to respect him as a fellow human being. And since I think that what he wrote is something extremely valuable, very well thought out and coherent, and since I am interested in these subjects and presumably know something about them, that therefore I should try to contact him and engage him both as a human being and as someone whose thought I respect.

RW: The term sin that just appeared reminds me—I understand you are, or were, a Dominican priest. Are you currently still a Dominican priest?

Hoinacki: I don't think one can erase that.

RW: Could tell us a little about that part of your life? I don't know enough about the Roman Catholic church to know about the different orders. I know some of them are monastic.

Hoinacki: The Dominicans are a quasi-monastic order. A new invention of the 12th and 13th centuries. When I was in college one of the books that came to my attention was a book called *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton. Books can have a very strong effect on me, and this was perhaps the first book that moved me in this very strong way. I had to ask the same questions that Merton asked. Merton studied scholastic philosophy and I said, I want to study that stuff too. So I checked around to see what the best places were to study scholastic philosophy in this hemisphere. The two places recommended to me were Laval University in Quebec and the Catholic University of America in Washington. I decided Catholic University was the safest one for me to choose and I went there.

While I was there I looked at this question of the priesthood and the Dominicans looked attractive to me. They seemed to emphasize an intellectual life and they had a big house across the street from where I was living, so I walked over there and introduced myself and talked to them and I decided that yes, this is where I wanted to go.

One of the Dominicans there talked with me over a period of a year and then said, okay. But all the classes were in Latin. I didn't know Latin. So I had to enroll in a special course in Providence, Rhode Island where I studied Latin for a year. Then there were three years of what they called philosophy. And then four years of theology. Afterwards I became a priest and was assigned to New York City. From New York I was assigned to go to Chile in South America.

RW: Now all of this comes before you were at UCLA?

Hoinacki: Yes. In the meantime I'd met Illich in 1960 while I was in New York City working on E. 68th St. at a church there. I found there were lots of people I had to deal with who spoke Spanish. I didn't know a word of Spanish. So I looked around and found that the best place to learn Spanish, if you really wanted to work at it, was at a place in Puerto

Rico. As it turned out it had been set up by Ivan Illich, and that is where I met him. I returned to New York City in 1962 and heard a rumor that the Dominicans were going to send me to Chile. I thought, I'd better take my vacation before they sent me. I knew that Illich had gone to Mexico, so I went down to see what he was doing. Illich asked, before I left, if I'd come and work with him. I told him I would if my superiors would assign me there. I was convinced he was doing good work. Illich said, okay, "I'll arrange that."

The Dominicans did send me to Chile. In the meantime, Illich started working on my superiors to get them to assign me to Mexico. They resisted him, but Illich is not someone to be deterred. He went to Rome because he had contacts there. He was educated in the seminary there and said, "I'm going to the Pope if necessary." First he went to the head of the Dominicans, a Spaniard named Suarez, and said, "I want this man assigned to me." Illich is a Roman Catholic priest who was working under Cardinal Spellman. Spellman supported Illich's work until the day Spellman died.

Anyway, every year or two Suarez would go all over the world checking to see how things were going with the various Dominicans and he told Illich, I'm going to Chile in a couple of weeks and I'll talk to this guy. He did, and he called me in. He introduced himself as the Master General and asked me what I knew about Illich's work. I told him what I thought of it and he said, "Okay, pack your bags and go."

So I packed my bags and went to Mexico and worked with Illich there for three years. Then I decided to marry. I had no argument with the priesthood, with the Dominicans, with Illich, with anything except I wanted to marry.

It was a confusing time. I wondered, should I leave Mexico? stay? What should I do? Illich said, if you're going to get married, you're going to have a wife to support. That means you're going to need a job. To get a job you're going to need a piece of paper. The piece of paper is called a PhD. He was just confirming what I already knew. I decided to get a PhD.

Illich had met all the people who were heads of Latin American studies departments in U. S. universities. They had all met in Cuernavaca for their annual convention, and Illich had gotten to know them all. He told me there was only one guy he really respected, Johannes Wilbert. Illich had the idea you study under some individual, not in a school or a department. The institution doesn't count, it's the person who counts, a European idea. Wilbert was at UCLA.

The woman I wanted to marry lived in San Pedro near Los Angeles. I asked her to arrange an appointment and she did. I walked into Wilbert's office and told him I wanted to get a PhD. I told him that Illich had told me he was the man I should see in the U.S. He said, okay.

He hadn't seen a single record or test I'd done. He hadn't seen anything. He was taking Illich's word alone. I didn't even have a letter. He just took my word for it. He was a remarkable man, and we're still very dear friends.

I got married and my wife got a job teaching. We got by somehow. I finished the degree, but while I was at UCLA I decided I had to go to Venezuela.

RW: I see. Let's jump forward in time. You'd gone to Venezuela and returned. You'd already left the university where you'd been teaching for seven years. You'd gotten the land and had already been doing subsistence farming for a few years. Then you decided

you needed to supplement your farm income. Jobs were not easy to find where you were living. You ended up with a position as a kitchen helper in a university dining hall, is that right? To get that job you had to withhold a lot of information, that you'd been a college professor, a priest and so on.

Hoinacki: I had been getting along all right on the farm for a number of years, but I needed the extra money to help out my daughter who was going to college. So I first went down to the university where I already had adjunct faculty status because I'd wanted to use their library. They'd been willing to give me that and I thought maybe they'd let me teach one course a semester, but nothing was available. Then I looked around the university to see if there were any other academic jobs, "respectable jobs," but that didn't work out.

Then it hit me, why am I trying to get one of these respectable kinds of jobs? That's the wrong way to go. I came to see, this is ridiculous! I shouldn't be trying to get a respectable job. That's the worst thing I could do! That's what I left years ago! So then I got the kitchen job.

RW: You said that this kitchen job, which was just simple labor, left you totally free to think while carrying out your tasks, and that you used this free time to think. Most people would have been daydreaming. But because of your training as a Dominican, I take it, you had learned how to think in an intentional way. I think you called it "recollection." It strikes me as a very unusual thing.

Hoinacki: Within the western Christian tradition there is an idea—today some writers use the word "mindfulness"—but some writers still stick with the old word, "recollection." The idea is that one is always recollected. It has to do with the concept of what it is to be human. This comes out of Aristotle, and then secondly from the scholastics of which Thomas Aquinas who died in 1274, is the pinnacle. These people said you must be able to act humanly, which means one should use one's reason and think about what you're doing. One should be able to choose the good action from among your alternatives.

They have a theory about "habits and virtues." What is habit, what is virtue? If you don't think about what you should do, you automatically do whatever your habit has inclined you to do. You automatically fall into that.

If a person lives what Plato and Socrates call "a reflective life, an examined life" one will always be thinking. Since I come out of that tradition, I agree with that and I've tried to practice that kind of thing. So it was very easy for me to practice this kind of thinking while I was washing dishes. What else did I have to do? That's the way I trained my mind to work.

RW: If I'm following you—part of this is that you are actually examining some of your thinking habits. You would not want to be thinking "automatically," right? If you see what I'm driving at.

Hoinacki: Yes. See, what you would do is you would always have certain ideas or themes or notions that you would want to think about. You don't just "think in general." I would go to work each day with some particular point I would want to think about, some idea, some specific news item or something I'd read the night before. You would always have to be very specific and very concrete about that.

RW: Eventually you sold your farm. You sold it for, I believe you said, one third of the



assessed value. Not only did you sell it for this extremely low price, but then you carried the mortgage yourself at no interest! These are remarkable decisions. I wonder if you would say a few words about that.

Hoinacki: Originally my intention was to give it away. I felt that in my life I'd been given a lot, that I've been a very privileged and fortunate person. I'd been given a free education all the way through. I'd been given very good parents. I've had good friends—people like Illich, like Wilbur at UCLA. My wife and I have two lovely children—can't imagine anyone having more decent, good children. They're grown now. I had a wonderful life with my wife, and so I felt it was not right to take money.

I thought, well, I've lived pretty well without money until now, and I can probably find something to support myself, because I'd become accustomed to getting along without much money. I'd had the experience of this kitchen-helper job and thought, I can work at a job like that. So I was going to give it away, but I decided against that, not because my children opposed that—they said, "sure, give it away if that's what you want to do!"—but because it wouldn't be fair to them if I didn't sell it for something. They would have the expense of burying me when I die, and I hadn't given much to them anyway, just a pittance to my daughter. So I thought, I should sell it for something, but how much? Maybe a third would be okay. I think it came to around twenty thousand dollars—way, way under the assessed value.

Not charging interest was also important to me. I've studied the history of interest in the West. Of course that begins in the Hebrew scriptures. At any rate, I found I couldn't accept taking interest. On this type of loan I felt it would be usury. Why did I need the interest? I could justify interest under some conditions, of course. If it were a hardship to me, for instance. But if it's no hardship, how could I accept making money for not doing any work? I don't think one should receive money for not doing some kind of work.

RW: You've described yourself as a Thomist, but "not a hard-backed Thomist" as you put it. What is it that attracted you to his thought?

Hoinacki: Well, I think it's very important to stand within a tradition. I don't think one can make up one's own philosophy, that is, just from starting to think. The difficulty of that is shown by Wittgenstein. He, in a sense, tried to do that. Descartes also tried to do that. They thought that the old tradition didn't make sense any more and they had good reasons for thinking that. You can see why Descartes' efforts failed. And for very different reasons, Wittgenstein's efforts failed. You have to go into that and it would be a long complicated thing. So it seems to me one needs to stand within a tradition.

I was born a Roman Catholic and, in this western tradition, there are various intellectual currents within it or associated with it. Some people would argue that the main current is associated with Scholasticism and its exemplary figure is Aquinas. Not all would agree. I have looked at the history of western thought both through primary documents and secondary documents, and it seems to me that, in this western tradition, the most coherent, the most sensible, the most intellectually respectable set of ideas are represented by this guy Aquinas. I think one can go beyond him, and he leaves openings in such a way that one can extend his thought without abandoning it.

Right now, here in Oakland I'm teaching a course, six days of the week, one hour a day, on Latin. We take a text of Aquinas and we go through that text word by word. What they're finding is that they're intrigued. They show up every morning, never miss. I've never done this before, but I find it's a tremendous pleasure. What I'm finding is that I'm

further convinced of the coherence and the truth of the way this guy proceeds and what he has to say.

RW: You remarked at one point that if you could help undermine the idea of progress, you'd be pleased with that—this unexamined faith we have in the idea of progress.

Hoinacki: Yes.

RW: I wonder if you think that in Aquinas' time there may have been understandings which were actually more informed, more grounded, in essential human realities that we have today?

Hoinacki: Not only is that true, but it was perhaps a different kind of reality than we have today. That's why some people think you can not use this philosophy because, for example, he was basing himself on Aristotelian biology. Since biologists no longer accept that, the tendency would be to assume that the philosophical reasoning based on that biology also does not hold water today. There are two considerations here. One, is his thought historically contingent? There's no doubt about that. In a different age one would have thought differently, and one thinks differently today. On the other hand, his thought represents a certain way of thinking. If I were to go into the East I'd find a whole different way of thinking, of conceptualizing what is the universe, what is a person.

I feel I have to root myself in my own tradition, to get my feet on a ground. I feel the only ground that is safe for me is this ground, not some Eastern ground which will always be, as translated through westerners, superficial or dilettantish. I'm exaggerating a little bit there, it may not always be, but that's the danger. Not for Easterners, of course, but for westerners.

So it seems to me that it's very easy to spot where Aquinas is basing himself, for instance, on Aristotelian biology and to what extent that is perhaps not the best way to conceptualize biology, not that present biology is the final word. Nevertheless it seems to me that Aquinas' thought is still coherent in terms of his basic notions of how the mind works, and how human beings act. I don't think that Freud's work, and those that come out of that tradition, in any way destroys Aquinas. What they do is show that you may have to take into account the unconscious. You may have to take into account repression, transference, etc. But I don't see how this destroys the basic thought of Aquinas.

RW: Do you think that in Aquinas's time there was, in general—among people at large—a better connection with feeling functions and with the body and sensation?

Hoinacki: I think that's quite evident. I think that's evident in any study of texts of these various years. From the time of Descartes on, if you could name a time or a person, people and the west have had increasing difficulty in being in contact with their own bodies. And of course, Illich is involved in trying to think through and write about this. What he calls the dis-enfleshment of people. The dis-embodiment of people. Whether you want to talk about something like "virtual reality" —I mean, where's the flesh in virtual reality? They talk about chat rooms on the internet. Chat rooms? Chat only can happen when I can look into your eyes and see how you're moving your head at this moment. If I want to call Internet communication "chat," I'm deceiving myself. I'm starting to live by certain kinds of illusions which, of course, I think the contemporary world is full of.

There are illusions in the middle ages, of course, but on this specific point they were much more in touch with reality than we are, meaning many people today.

RW: I was struck by something you described in your book, *El Camino*. [A journal Hoinacki kept on his walking pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela] You were walking and suddenly realized that you were truly present to where you were, actually in touch with everything around you in a way that's hard to describe. You wrote that you'd never experienced it before, in fact, and you were 65 years old at the time. I wonder if you'd say something about that.

Hoinacki: I think the entire question of experience is infinitely penetrable. There's no end to what one can experience in terms of depth. I'm firmly convinced, especially from my experience in Spain, that the entire question of experience is really not understood, not explored, not experienced. You read the anthropological literature about liminal experience and those kinds of ideas, and you say, ahh, there's more to experience than just living a kind of surface life, a kind of washed out life. I do believe that much in the world around each one of us is designed against experience. For example, the experience of actually touching the soil. How many times do we actually take off our shoes and walk on the dirt? What do different kinds of soil feel like? How many times do we even open the windows? I've been in buildings where you have no experience of any kind of air except this artificial stuff that is blown in through vents. There are so many ways every day that we, namely many people, deprive ourselves of experience. We no longer even know how to take advantage of what is possible, just like people don't know how to take advantage of leisure, for example. How to use experience? How to walk out and feel the air, to see the sky, the trees, how they're changing, to experience the person in front of you? I have the impression from my own experience that so much has been washed out of me.

RW: On your pilgrimage, your 1000 kilometer walk, you made these two rules: not to read anything about this famous pilgrimage, and always to walk alone. I take it that you wanted to keep the room for your own experience entirely open.

Hoinacki: Well, I didn't think of it that way exactly. I'd gone to Compostela earlier and had been at the cathedral. I'd sat there for several hours in a quiet little chapel trying to think, why in the world do people come here? I wondered because I could see nothing that would pull me to this place. But I knew that hundreds of thousands, maybe millions had walked there since the eighth or ninth centuries. So it occurred to me that the only way I could ever find out why anyone came there would be to do it myself. I would have to enter into the experience of these people somehow. And how could I do that? Because everything is so different today. Well, I have two legs, and the air in some way is the same and, to a certain extent, the earth had not changed. In some places there was paving, but the mud was the same, the dirt was the same, the rain was the same, and the sky is much the same. If I were to enter that air and walk under that sky, I thought that perhaps I could enter into something like whatever those people experienced. Then perhaps I could find out why these people did this. I didn't think anything about all this sense experience. I didn't realize that was going to happen.

And instead of sitting around reading books about it I decided to read nothing on the subject before I went. I didn't want to fill up my mind with some writer's ideas. Later on, after I'd done it myself, I read those accounts. Then I could see, this account rings true and that one doesn't, or this guy saw something interesting which I missed.

RW: You called that experience of total presence an exemplar, and said that we need exemplars.

Hoinacki: I think this is true in all kinds of areas. For instance, it's absolutely necessary to

have human exemplars whether it was the Greeks reading Homer and looking at the exemplary persons in the Iliad and the Odyssey, or the Christians reading The Lives of the Saints.

And I think it's necessary in terms of exemplary experiences. If you've never loved another person very intensely, for instance, you're not going to know what love is. Now that's a very problematic thing because historically all kinds of influences come in. Notions of love at any specific moment in Western society can be really very questionable, let us say. If you've never experienced what it is to have a really really good and intimate friend and have been able to share that friendship, your life not only is emptier, but you have no way to judge other people. You're really at sea.

You need exemplary experiences of place, of thought, of clear thought. Why? It's just that there are a lot of bad teachers around, and a lot of bad books—a lot of bad examples. If you really get into, say, thought and into prayer—you could come to someone like Plotinus, a late Greek philosopher who goes into the experience of God somehow. He was a Pagan but very attractive to Christian thinkers because of the way his thought went.

But there is a certain problem with Greek thought. I think there's a certain overemphasis on intellect, but that's another historical question.

RW: I'm tempted to ask more about that, but I wanted to touch a little on Simone Weil. I was just reading her last night. There's this one thing she said which I think is amazing: "There are two forces in the universe: gravity and light." Do you want to say anything about that?

Hoinacki: Yes. I find her a difficult author, but in many ways the most attractive author of all the people I've read. She also is one of the authors I used when I was teaching at the university. The students have enormous difficulty in reading her texts. But I stuck with her. There is much that I don't understand and that is not understandable unless you are able to experience the prayer life that she experienced, which was not only unique in terms of its depth or height, but unique in terms also of her person. She was so different from every other woman around in France at that time, and of every other person in her own circle—utterly different! The way she dressed, the way she talked, the way she acted. Everything about her. So it becomes enormously difficult, not only to read her work, but to understand what she is saying.

She says now and then I get insights into what I think is a reality that I think no one else has ever said. For example, I have an essay on my desk which I always carry with me. She asks, how can one come to respect the other? How is it possible to respect another person? She said, there is only one way to do that. In every person there is some inclination, something deep in that person, we would say, "deep in that person's heart" which goes out towards infinite good, absolute good. That is how everyone is made. The fact that there is on this earth any good at all, any truth at all, is because someone has gotten into contact with this. In that way a person is somehow inspired to know what is good and true, that is, through this kind of contact—which is in every person. Every person is capable of this, and that's why I have to respect this other person, because that potential contact with infinite good is in there. That is the only reason I can respect that other person. The only reason. All these other reasons—nonsense! she says. None of that other stuff holds up.

When I'm in America I don't go by airplane, I only travel by bus. There are various reasons for that. I meet people I would never ordinarily meet. I would never see these people on

this earth if I were not on a bus—so-called poor people, people at the bottom. Some of them are not very pleasant. The poor are not always pleasant people, and I will find myself faced with the question, how can I respect this person? There I find Simone Weil ultimately practical. If I can not see that inclination in that person for good, I can never come to respect that person. If I can't see that, then I'm lost.