

The Intimate and the Ultimate

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A few days ago, I was sitting in my office right back behind where I'm speaking now and I looked out my window in the direction of Queen Anne Road and noticed a large sailboat passing down the road. It was a beautiful Fall afternoon and it shouldn't be any surprise that large sailboats are on this stretch of road, for this is the time of year when they are being hauled and stored landside for the winter. But what caught my eye was that there was a man in full sailing gear riding in the cockpit of the boat.

I imagine that he was the owner. I also imagine it gave him something of a thrill to stand at the helm one last time for the season. I have always been a small-boat sailor, but from the few times that fate has let me at the helm of large boats, I know that it is a great and powerful experience to have that much boat responding to the motions of your hand.

And I thought of the old mantra for rugged individualism, "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul." When we are out on the bounding main and the large vessel responds to our every whim, it is easy to believe this. The world is our oyster, we can take this ship wherever we want to drive it. But in reality even when we are at sea, our choices are determined by wind and tide and shoals. A sailor who steers heedlessly will soon find herself aground or lost.

But this man on Queen Ann Road was only playing at being the master of his ship. The ship in fact was on a trailer and the trailer was going wherever the truck driver was going. And thus it seems a good metaphor for our lives. We play at being in charge, but where we're going and how we're getting there are often quite independent of our wills and our plans.

Now a lot of you don't have much use for the idea of God, particularly for a God who makes decisions and plans and carries them out, a God of Providence. I want to ask you to bear with me while I describe some ideas about God which have intrigued me and then think with me whether what I have described is really about God or is rather a description of reality and life and the meaning of our existence here which is independent of the idea of God on which it was originally hung.

Gordon Kaufman was the most eminent theologian teaching at Harvard Divinity School when I went there, and he advocates what he calls constructive theology: God is ultimately a mystery, we will never be able to say definitively what God is, so we might as well just try to imagine what kind of God we would like to have. We will not construct God, but we will

construct our ideas of God, intentionally and mindfully.

Gordon Kaufman made a comment when he visited our theology class in Divinity School which has stayed with me. We were asking him lots of questions, and one person asked him whether he felt a personal relationship to God, and he replied, "I can't imagine having a personal relation to the creator of the universe."

Probably the most influential Unitarian Universalist theologian of the late Twentieth Century was James Luther Adams. In the mid-eighties, Adams gave a talk looking back at his career in which he said that his principal concerns were the "intimate and the ultimate"¹. To me, this is an apt description of two aspects of God.

Look at it in light of Kaufman's comment. In the world of our everyday experience, the public and the personal are two separate spheres. Modern media bring the faces and words of the movers and shakers onto our TV and computer screens, but there is a distance. President Obama's office e-mails me, but I can't e-mail him back and expect a personal response. I can't phone Senator Kerry anytime to tell him what's on my mind. And even if I am thrown together with someone famous or important by fate, do I really have anything to say? Have you ever been in an elevator with Paul Newman or a ski-lift line with Tom Cruise and afterwards you thought of the really clever thing you could have said?

So in the normal course of human events, we have trouble connecting with those humans who are in a position of power. If God is the creator of the universe, and may even be involved in running it, she's got to be the most important person of all. How could we dare to ask for any face time with God? How could we dare to pray that she keeps the traffic light green until we can make it through the intersection? Doesn't she have better things to concern herself with? I mean, don't you sometimes have the fear that while God is preoccupied listening patiently to my complaint about how unreasonable my wife or mother or child has become, some disaster will break out in another part of the world?

This is why it is a paradox that people have conceived God as both intimate and ultimate. God is both the smallest and closest thing and the greatest and farthest. As Martin Luther put it, "Nothing is so small that God is even smaller, and nothing is so large but that God is even larger."

In other words, a traditional conception of God is that he ties together two ends of the scale of things, and what I want to suggest is that this tying together may be a property of the

¹"A Time to Speak: Conversations at Collegium" from *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, George K Beach, Ed., Beacon Press 1991, p. 20.

scale of things whether or not we believe in God. The intimate and the ultimate may be two sides of the same coin.

James Luther Adams certainly thought so. In his theology and in his actions, he constantly emphasized the relational nature of human existence. The decisive forms of virtue, he said, are institutional; there is no such thing as a good man as such, there is the good husband, the good teacher, the good father². Everything exists in relation to everything else, or as our Seventh Principle has it, we are part of an interconnected web of all existence.

When we think of God in the Hebrew Bible, we tend to think at the large end of the scale. We think of the first and second creation stories in Genesis, God separating the light from the darkness, making the world and visiting the Garden of Eden and enforcing his rules. We think of the movie Ten Commandments, and the special effects creating a God ordering the Red Sea to Part or moving in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

But in Psalm 139, God is painted most vividly as inside each of us, and knowing us better than we know ourselves:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

2: You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

3: You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

4: Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

5: You hem me in behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

6: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

This God is both intimate and ultimate, creating the universe, moving the heavens, and at the same time knowing your words before you even speak them. Have you ever had anyone in your life so close to you that they know what you are going to say before you say it? I think this kind of friendship is more common among women than men, but it is precious wherever it shows up. Ellen Goodman, the Globe Columnist, wrote a book about women's conversation a few years back which was entitled "I know just What You Mean."

And the question I want to ask each of us to ponder, the theists and the agnostics and the atheists and humanist and religious naturalists and all other theological stripes, is what would it do for you spiritually to have someone in your life who knows just what you mean? Someone who was always there, who was just a call away?

I can't say myself what it would be like. I have to say that of all the prayers I offered to

² "Guiding Principles For a Free Faith" (The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism) in *On Being Human Religiously*, Boston Unitarian Universalist Assn. 1976, p. 17.

God in my childhood, I never once heard God talking back. But I have had many human experiences where I have felt deeply understood. A few years ago, I discovered a diary that I kept in high school, and it is full of sappy romantic reflections on the experience of falling in love and how that is a process of knowing and being known by someone else. That was forty-five years ago, and for about 35 of those years, I felt like Lee, the object of my high school affections and then my wife, was almost my alter ego. I didn't know where my personality left off and hers began.

And I remember, too, one interview more than a decade ago. Every ministerial candidate has to go through a course of training called Clinical Pastoral education, or CPE. I did two programs of CPE, the first was in Charleston in 1996. I can vividly remember the interview with the nun who ran the program. It was supposed to last an hour, and it ended up lasting about four. She asked me the most amazing questions, and as I talked, I got the sense that she knew me better than I knew myself. Certainly at the end of the interview, I knew myself a lot better than when I went in.

And I went on from that interview to find an incredible liberating intimacy in sharing my feelings with the others in the program, who had been complete strangers to me before we started. It was then that I began to get a hint of the power of small group processes.

Talking about this has a peculiar poignancy for me because my marriage, the marriage that was knit together forty-five years ago, came apart as a direct result of this experience; I had tried to force our relationship to yield the same intimacy I was feeling in the CPE program, the intimacy that I had felt at the first, and it had grown in different directions then and wouldn't bear the stress.

And I have a spiritual intimacy in my present marriage to Jacqueline, and try for spiritual connections with you-all in my ministerial role here, but I would like to have that kind of intimacy with God, and I imagine myself getting two things out of it. One is understanding. Someone who knows just what I mean, even when I don't. I know what you're thinking out these in the pews – maybe if he could get God to preach the sermons, *we* would know what he means!

But the other thing is accountability. I have a tendency to deceive myself, to fall short, to cover my tracks, to spin my actions. In short, I am not always as honest with myself as I would like to be. I would find it really useful to have someone who knows me well who can tell me when I'm not shooting straight.

The Psalmist says

“If I say, ‘Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with you.”

I would like for more light to shine in my soul. I would like more clarity. St. Paul says, now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. What would it be like to know ourselves without any illusions, denials, deceptions or preconceptions, to know ourselves entirely as we are? What would it be like to have a God who demanded that you be completely honest with him or her?

So maybe, in terms of Gordon Kaufman's constructive theology, an intimate God is one that we would like to have. If we are listing desirable traits in the God we order from Sears & Roebuck, intimacy might be one of them. That still doesn't change the fact that most of us don't believe in him or her or it, but I wonder whether it sheds some light on our own spiritual needs.

To me, the personhood of God is a metaphor, a way our limited human imaginations might conceive of God which allows for some intimacy, but personhood is not a necessary attribute of God as God might be in God's self. It's easier for me to conceptualize God as an impersonal force, like electric power, or an emotional one like love. But we can't talk to an impersonal force. An impersonal force is not going to understand us, to know just what we mean. We need something with a consciousness, an intelligence. It would be nice if we could get something with a face. Add that to the list of specifications in our Sears Roebuck order.

Our Seventh Principle speaks of the interconnected web of all existence, and this is consistent with what I have called the doughnut theology of Unitarian Universalism, a view of reality that was decentralized, that was a network of interrelatedness without anything at the core. Maybe God is this way, too. Maybe there are pieces of God in each one of us, and God proper is at least the sum of all the pieces.

Emerson certainly thought of it this way. He had an Oversoul which consisted of the sum of everyone's individual souls. His thought echoed Hinduism, with its concepts of Atman, the individual soul and Brahman, the essence of everything that is. The goal of enlightenment in certain schools of Hindu thought is said to be to realize the identity of Atman and Brahman, which is another way of saying the intimate and the ultimate. Today's responsive reading from the Bhagavad-Gita says

"I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature: I am the beginning, the life span, and the end of all."

This also echoes Plato's idea that the most important attribute of God is reason, *λογος* (*logos*) and that each person had the seed of reason or *σπερματικός λογος* (*spermatikos logos*) in their own breast which communicates with the *λογος* of God.

Now I don't know how the God who is the sum of all individual souls could also keep the galaxies going and keep track of the dark matter between them. But I do know that thinking of God in this way calls us back to our relatedness. The intimate and ultimate are tied together.

We are not separate, not a special creation, but are part of the warp and weft of matter. Our very atoms are material which originated in the stars. Perhaps our thoughts originated there too.

Like the man at the helm of the boat being driven down Queen Ann Road, we are apt to think of ourselves as isolated individuals, captaining our ship and master of our souls. But in reality we are being driven by forces over which we have little if any control, in a universe where everything is intimately related to everything else. Our isolation, like our control, is an illusion. We are relentlessly relational beings.

Many of us are in various degrees of despair or shock over the results of the recent elections, and the tendency whenever one is hurt is to withdraw into a shell, to find, like Superman, a fortress of solitude and retreat into it, cut off the newspapers, escape into fantasy entertainment, go to bed and pull the covers over our heads. As understandable as this is, it is an illusion that we can disconnect; we are tied together, and the responsible thing to do as religious people is to engage, to witness for our values, to stay in conversation even though it is painful to do so, to seek justice by whatever means our hearts and minds lead us to. The intimate and the ultimate are tied whether or not we call that which ties them by the name of God. Amen.

Readings

Brahman

I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature:
I am the beginning, the life span, and the end of all.

__I am the radiant sun among the light-givers:

__I am the mind:

__I am consciousness in the living.

I am death that snatches all;
I, also, am the source of all that shall be born.

__I am time without end:

__I am the sustainer: my face is everywhere.

I am the beginning, the middle, and the end in creation:

I am the knowledge of things spiritual.

__I am glory, prosperity, beautiful speech, memory, intelligence, steadfastness, and forgiveness.

I am the divine seed of all lives.

In this world nothing animate or inanimate exists without me.

__I am the strength of the strong;

__I am the purity of the good.

I am the knowledge of the knower.

There is no limit to my divine manifestations.

__Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful, or glorious, that you may know to have come forth from a fraction of my power and glory.

Bhagavad-Gita

Psalm 139

Prayer for deliverance from enemies

1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
10 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!

18 I try to count them — they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end — I am still with you.

19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
 and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me —
20 those who speak of you maliciously,
 and lift themselves up against you for evil!

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

22 I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
24 See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.