

Listening to the Infinite Silence

**Three Study Books
on Hearing the Bible Speak
in Contemporary Metaphors**

by

Gene W. Marshall

About the Author

Gene Marshall has a long history of participation in Christian renewal. He was a leader in the Christian student movements of the early fifties, part of a theological revolution at Perkins School of Theology, a local church pastor, a chaplain in the Army, a founding member of a Christian religious order, and an activist in the civil rights revolution and in inner city renewal. For fourteen years he was on the staff of the Ecumenical Institute. He was for seven of those years the dean of an 8-week residential, leadership-training program called "The Academy." He led seven similar programs in Europe, Asia, and Australia. For the past 12 years he has been doing full-time research and training as part of a nonprofit organization for religious and ethical research called "Realistic Living." He is also an ecological activist and an organizer of the bioregional movement.

Educationally, he has a bachelor's degree in mathematics and physics, a master's degree in theology, and has done considerable further studies in Christian theology, non-Christian religions, history, the philosophy of social change, psychology, male/female relations, ecology, and economics. He now lives in the woods on the Red River Flats of Northeast Texas. He is a husband, a father, a grandfather, and an organic gardener.

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Religion, if it is true religion and not a hoax, expresses Awe. The stories of the Bible and other ancient religious writings were written to express Awe, and they were remembered because they did. So what is Awe? To answer this question, I must simply tell the truth about what Awe is like in my own life--what it means for me personally to confront the truly Awesome. It does not require a classical religious story in order to express Awe. Awe can be expressed in a very ordinary scientific-sounding story.

Brian Swimme has helped me to construct the following story.¹ It is just a story, but it is a true story, and it is an Awe story. I am outside on a very dark, clear night lying on my back on a cot looking at the stars that fill the night sky. I realize that these stars were here long before I was born and will be still burning long after I am dead. I grip the sides of my cot as I contemplate the vastness of this scope of time. I also realize that what I am seeing is also spatially vast. I am looking out into my galaxy of a hundred billion or more stars. I am on the surface of this big ball, Earth. "Up" means to me away from the center of Earth. But I could just as well consider the direction I am looking as "down"--that I am being held up against the Earth by the glue of gravity and that I am swimming among the stars and planets of my home galaxy.

Perhaps you are already feeling the Awe expressed by my story, but there is much more Awe. Some of those dim points of light that I see are whole galaxies like my own. There are billions of them. Some of them are so far away that it has taken the light many billions of years to reach me. Seeing those galaxies is like traveling back, back, back in time, 10 billion, 12 billion years. If I could continue traveling back I would finally come to that point in time/space where the entire cosmos began, the Big Bang. I am certainly Awed by the realization that all space and time, all the laws of physics, all energy and matter; the Earth, life, humanity, and I myself began with a trillion degree hot moment of explosion.

Using my always curious human imagination, I choose to push back one more step. What is before that Big Bang? What is before all time? What is before every before? And the answer that I actually hear is: "Infinite Silence." It all emerged from the Infinite Silence. Now that is surely Awesome.

And I am a relationship with this Infinite Silence. I am lying here on my cot in my back yard looking out through this black night sky all the way to the Infinite Silence. Now this is Awesome. My cat is lying on my lap and she does not see any Infinite Silence, or any galaxies for that matter. She is an amazingly capable and surprisingly conscious being, but she does not possess my capacity for Awe. Now that is also Awesome to me.

My cat does not care what is Awesome to me. I cannot share my Awe with my cat. But I can share my Awe with you, with those of you who are willing to be truthful about your own experience of human life. And my sharing of Awe is not cramming religious opinions down your throat. I am simply calling your attention to what you already know or can easily know for yourself--can easily see with your own inward eyes.

The Infinite Silence is not simply that boundless Void before the Big Bang but also a constant companion in the living present. The following poem expresses this awareness.

¹ Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* (Orbis Books: 1996)

The Infinite Silence Speaks
through every rustle of tree leaves,
through every singing bird,
through every sound of any kind,
and through the silent spaces between the sounds.

The Infinite Silence is Void and Darkness
but also Fullness, a dazzling backlight that shines through
every gleaming tree, every shimmering squirrel
and surrounds every human being
with a halo

The Infinite Silence Speaks

Poetic Discourses on the Book of Genesis

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Preface

Bill Moyers' recent publication of conversations on the book of Genesis established in my mind that almost everyone has a dialogue of some sort with these ancient stories: psychologists and sociologists; ethical thinkers and artistic writers; Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims; theists, atheists, agnostics, secular mystics, religious conservatives, and religious innovators. All seem to feel drawn, positively or negatively, to these stories.

Partly, this interest is due to the fact that these stories deal with primal matters that every thoughtful person must confront. Partly it is due to the fact that these stories have played a fundamental role in the evolution of Western culture. Our interest may also be due to the fact that we are experiencing, at this particular time in history, a need to reexamine the basic axioms of our culture. In order to confront the unprecedented future we face, we may feel that we must reconsider what we believe and feel about good and evil, about nature and culture, about finitude and whatever we might mean by "the Infinite."

And why am I adding this book to the already plentiful array of books on the Genesis themes? I am moved by something more than the fact that I, like so many others, am drawn to these ancient stories. I am moved to write this book because it seems to me that the essence of the book of Genesis has not been grasped in the books that I have read. It seems to me that the authors and arrangers of the book of Genesis have an amazingly consistent and clear picture of how life functions and how meaningful living needs to be conducted. But their modes of expressing themselves are so ancient, and so strange to modern ears! My aim is to translate, from their strange place in history to my also strange place in history, their messages about life that are universal to both times.

Many of the insights I am sharing are expressed elsewhere. I have learned from numerous sources. But my theft of wisdom has been carried out within a method of inquiry and within an overall emerging religious philosophy that makes this book significantly different from every other book on Genesis that I have seen. Nevertheless, while I claim a depth of understanding I seldom find elsewhere, I do not claim to possess the last word about these ever-new and ever-resourceful ancient stories. I do not need to claim any sort of finality in order to claim an extensive confidence that I am on the right path toward actually hearing with contemporary ears the truth contained in these majestic tales.

So, I invite you to take this journey with me into this deep well of our past and thereby into a more complete vision of the overwhelming potentialities of our future.

1. The Infinite Silence Spoke

The Infinite Silence spoke
“Let there be light.”
And the Black Abyss gleamed
with a single spot
of trillion degree illumination.

Expanding where-when
swirled into being a hundred billion
galaxies of fiery suns.
Then super suns exploded
into super novas of mega-brilliance,
assembling the elemental parts
of future planets.

And to the expanded consciousness
of future beings,
the Infinite Silence spoke again,
“All this is good;
it is very, very, very good.”

Cascading rocks and ices
sphered themselves into a molten
plasma with gassy skin.
Cooling vapors rained down
oceans upon the rocks and sands
below the bluing skies.

And the Infinite Silence spoke yet again,
“All this is good;
it is very, very, very good.”

Along the beaches of massive oceans,
swamps of thickening chemical soup
assembled the larger molecules
of self-responding beings.

Rods and circles of living substance
exploded into billions of life experiments
along the warmer shores of the waters
that surfaced this sphere of
gas-enveloped
metallic-cored rock.

And the Infinite Silence spoke yet again,
“All this is good;
it is very, very, very good.”
Life had learned first to fire itself
with decaying complexity,
but soon expanded its grasp to basking in sun rays

and later to breathing in the oxygen-enriched air
which life itself had established.

Multicellular stems and trees of living growths
sprouted up in seas and spread to dry lands.
And as life learned to swim and crawl and fly,
water, land, and air were filled
with interacting forms of living action.

And the Infinite Silence spoke yet again,
“All this is good;
it is very, very, very good.”

Deep, deep into the calendar of time,
life became aware of being alive,
aware of the destiny of all living beings,
the destiny to soon become unalive
and to return again
to the gassy, watery dust.

Self-aware life gazed into the Infinite Silence,
into the Dark Abyss,
into the Blazing Fullness of vast and busy interaction,
and self-aware life, filled with dread and fascination,
embraced the courage to hear the Infinite Silence
say once again,

“All this is good;
it is very, very, very good.”

This poem expresses, in the images of our contemporary sciences, the theological point of the first chapter of the Bible. The original authors of Genesis One were doing the same thing I am doing in this poem: they were expressing their theological point in the images of the contemporary sciences of their day.

For decades, conservative Bible-believers have insisted on viewing the first chapter of Genesis literally. By so doing they have missed the point. The main point of the original authors of this chapter was not about how the cosmos originated. Their main point had to do with answering this question: what is the proper attitude of a self-aware human being toward the cosmos and its originating Power?

It is also completely irrelevant to try to compare the eras of contemporary evolution with the days of creation in this ancient story. Obviously, seven days was simply a story made up by these authors to undergird another theological point--namely, that it was good practice to work only six days and then take a day off to rest and celebrate the whole fabric of our lives. Perhaps these authors were a little outlandish to establish the Sabbath as a cosmic reality, but I am thankful to them for my day of rest, and for the teaching that I am well advised to put rest and celebration of my relationship with my Origin in my schedule.

Furthermore, the words of the first chapter of Genesis were not magically dictated to their author (or authors) from some super realm of ultimate validity. What happened to these authors was not essentially different from what happened to me as I wrote my poem. I woke at

three o'clock in the morning with these words going on in my head, "The Infinite Silence Spoke." I could say that these words came to me. I could also say that I made them up. Both statements are true. Also true is my experience of the Infinite Silence. I know that I know that I know that the Infinite is Silent. The Infinite does not speak. Humanity speaks, but the Infinite is Silent. The Infinite is that abiding Silence in which speech can occur. So I know that I know that I know that when I say that "the Infinite Silence spoke," I am speaking poetry, metaphor, myth. I am making this up. I have not experienced the Infinite Silence speaking literal words. In fact, looking at it in that way, "The Infinite Silence Spoke" is a ridiculous statement.

Now the authors of the first chapter of Genesis were doing nothing essentially different from what I was doing at three o'clock one fine morning some 2500 years later. These words came to them. And they made them up. Both statements are true.

When I say that the Infinite Silence spoke, I am picturing in my mind some Infinite Something with a mouth, but I know that this is poetry. I have never seen a mouth on some Infinite Something. And by saying that the Silence spoke, I am remaining present to the fact that my words are poetry. One of the things I like about this poetry is that it states a rational impossibility. How could Silence speak? What I literally mean by this Infinite Silence speaking is that the cosmos actually came into being. It did, it actually did. Humanity came into being. I came into being. This I have experienced. I am using the metaphor of "speech" for this Action of Origin which I have indeed experienced. The authors of the first chapter of the Bible were also using the metaphor of "speech" for the Action of Origin which they had experienced.

Literally speaking, there is no Supernatural Being living in a supernatural place causing our origin to happen. All this is poetry made up by human beings. But this poetry is about an actuality, about the actuality of our origin. The fine line between factual statement and poetic truth is constantly being confused in our era.

For example, the authors and publishers of those widely sold volumes called "*A Course in Miracles*" claim that the words of these books were strangely channeled to a particular woman from some super realm of spiritual validity. All sorts of contemporary gurus and quite ordinary persons are claiming to have received "channeled" messages. Assuming that some of these experiences of channeling are something more than a well-meaning hoax, what is going on here? If the Eternal is indeed Silent, who or what is speaking to these people? Here is my carefully considered theory: the collective unconscious of the human species is speaking to these people. The Infinite is not speaking to them, for the Infinite is Silent. My theory will not please most fans of channeled material, because they want their particular material to have eternal validity.

But I like my theory, because it illuminates why these channeled materials can be such a mix of valid insights and sentimental foolishness. The collective unconsciousness of the human species is a finite development, filled with valid insights into the Truth, but also filled with illusions and with grossly misleading ways of expressing human experience. My theory also provides us with a way of responding to this so-called "channeled" material. It must be tested with other experiences of truth. Channeled material can be rooted in the spirit of Truth. It can also be the expression of a misinformed or lying spirit.

The biblical materials were not channeled and do not claim to be channeled. The writers of the Bible do not deny that their stories are stories, that their poetry is poetry. When a biblical author talks of God's Word or calls his words "God's Word," the perceptive reader can see the smile on that author's face. The biblical author knows that he or she has made up God's word, that God, literally speaking, does not speak. The Infinite has no mouth, no voice, no words. These ordinary characteristics of ordinary finite realities are being used as metaphors for talking

about the Mouthless and Voiceless Silence. The biblical author is not a literalist. The biblical author is just a human being expressing an experience with the Infinite--with the Infinite which has concretely acted upon his or her life.

So, if in the words of Genesis One, the Speech of the Infinite Silence was not a channeled message but only a story made up by the biblical authors to express their own experience of the Infinite, what did the Infinite Silence say and what experience in the actual lives of the biblical authors did this Speech express?

The Infinite Silence said two things: (1) "Let there be actuality," and (2) "Actuality is good." Let us examine further each of these statements to see if we can discern what experiences in the lives of the biblical authors were expressed by each of these statements of the Infinite Silence.

(1) "Let There Be Actuality."

This statement, penned by the biblical authors, did not mean that they had experienced a supreme Being acting to create the cosmos. They did not experience a Creator and His or Her creation. This was part of the story they made up. They only experienced the actuality of their own coming into being in the context of the whole cosmos having also come into being. They called this coming into being of all actuality the action of their God. By so doing, they were defining what they meant by "God." They were saying what they worshiped, and they were saying what object of worship they were recommending to all human beings. So what was it they were recommending? What object of devotion, what core loyalty and dependency and center of meaning was God for them?

They recommended that you and I worship the Infinitely mysterious Source of our being and of the being of the whole cosmos. They had experienced this Source in the same ways we experience it today, namely as a mystery we cannot fathom. And further, they were telling us that it had been their experience that this Source could be worshiped. This was their God, their object of worship. Many of the other peoples who have lived on this Earth have recommended that we worship some aspect of a particular human society or some aspect of the human psyche. It could be argued that most of the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece were projections of the dynamics of the human psyche upon a "cosmic screen." Most of the gods and goddesses of ancient Babylon and Egypt were "cosmic" projections of the wonders of "civilization." The Pharaoh of Egypt who was both a man and a symbol for Egypt as a whole was mingled with these Egyptian gods into one overall claim for total devotion. Our contemporary industrial civilizations sometimes make similar claims, but we do not call this worship; we call it "patriotism." Or sometimes we call it "nationalism." Similarly, some contemporary therapists and personal growth workshop leaders are asking us to worship "love" or some other dynamic of the human psyche. But the Genesis authors recommend that we worship the Infinite, the incomprehensible Mystery, the boundless "Power" which births every being.

Now, let us slow down here and attempt to realize fully what this recommendation means. The Infinite, all-powerful, incomprehensibility is both the negation and the affirmation of each finite being. Our experience of the Infinite is our experience of being birthed, and it is also our experience of being unbirthed. We all know this, or can know this: our experience of being birthed and being unbirthed, our experience of being killed and unkillable, are two aspects of the same experiencing. There is no death without life, no life without death. There is no something without its limitation, and no limitation without there being something that is limited. The Infinite we actually experience is the invisible Source of all this enigmatic going-on-ness. And this is the Infinite that the authors of Genesis One recommend for our worship.

This personally encountered Infinite does not speak human speech. The Infinite is Silent, but

overwhelmingly ACTIVE in our lives. It is this ACTIVITY that we must keep in mind to understand the meaning of the Genesis One story which puts the phrase “Let there be actuality” in the “mouth” of the Infinite Silence.

(2) “Actuality is Good.”

Secondly, the Infinite Silence says, “Actuality is good.” What attitude toward actuality is being recommended by this line in the story? One clear implication of this statement is that humanity, instead of distancing ourselves from nature, should embrace being the natural beings we are. Indeed, from this perspective, being a human being means being brother and sister to every other natural reality. Our coming into being is not a tragic entrapment of our true spark in some gross material realm. Our coming into being is not the exile of our pretty soul in a ugly body. Our coming into being is not the loss of our Eternal bliss in this tough world of suffering and dying. No, this tough world, this embodied existence, is our home, our proper place, our good destiny. The Genesis authors are saying that this natural, down-to-Earth origin is not the action of some Demiurge, some secondary Source that we cannot trust. Rather, **our origin is the action of a Source which (or who) can be trusted.** Our actuality, all actuality, is good--very, very, very good.

For many generations, we have been reading the Genesis stories as if they were stories about a literal Supreme Being who not only exists in a realm that transcends nature but who also, in the second chapter of Genesis, breathed some sort of literal transcendence into the crass flesh of humanity. So we end up with a literal belief in a supernatural soul substance or ghost in the body to go along with our literal belief in a Supreme Being in some super realm next door. This sort of literalism is not an innocent child-like religion. It is a modern religion guilty of reading scientific factuality back into a metaphorical literature that was written before scientific factuality was preferred. If we are to understand Genesis One or Two or Three as these authors intended them to be understood, we must abandon our literalism.

So, we might wish to ask, what happens to our popular view of “human transcendence” or “soul substance” when we view this “Creator” of Genesis One not as a literal Supreme Being, but as a mythic character in a story about trusting the Source of our actuality?

We need not be saying that we do not have “soul.” We can indeed experience ourselves as a deep interiority. Our very capacity for contemplating our Infinitely mysterious origin sets us apart from the other members of the mammalian family. Furthermore, we can experience ourselves as detached observers. I can experience myself as a capacity for detachment from all the feelings and thoughts and impulses of my body. I can identify with this capacity for detachment and, therefore, say with some meaning, “I am not my body, I am a detached observer.” But is this dissociation from the body a holistic account of our actual experience? Might I not also say that my deepest interiority is nothing more and nothing less than the deepest depths of the human body itself? My deepest soul is my body experiencing the actions of my Infinite Origin and then self-awarably relating to that ongoing Origin through the actions of my body. In this context, my Soul or Spirit is not a transcendent substance, not a disembodied entity, but my capacity for self-aware relationship with the Infinite. The Infinite Source gives me my actuality and the profound freedom to respond to that gift either in gratitude for the gift or in rebellion. This capacity is my Soul. The gratitude option is my healthy Soul. The rebellious option is my sick Soul. This was the viewpoint that was being developed by the authors of Genesis One, Two, and Three.

When, during the Christian era, we combined this Biblical view of the “soul” with the Greek notion of a disembodied rational soul, something important was lost. We lost our connection

with the natural world. And we also lost some of our sensitivity to religious myth and story. We began to ask objective questions like “Does God exist?” And, “Will my immortal soul go to a pleasant or painful transcendent place?” These questions were never asked by the Genesis authors.

This was their question: what attitude toward actuality is healthy for the depths of my embodied being? And this was their answer: health means seeing actuality as the action of a trustworthy Infinity. Spiritual health means embracing this mythic speech from the Infinite Silence: “Actuality is good, it is very, very, very good.”

2. Living Somewhere to the East of Eden

When, in the distant Garden of our past,
human beings desired to be Eternal,
shame entered the cosmos.

Sensuality became shameful.
Ugliness became shameful.
Weakness became shameful.
Ignorance became shameful.
Our crummy childhoods became shameful.
Our lop-sided cultures became shameful.
Our deaths became shameful.
Our desires became shameful.
Our feelings became shameful.
Our thoughts became shameful.

Yes, when we chose to be wise, like God,
everything that was not God-like
became shameful.

My cat knows no shame.

But human beings do know shame. We also know guilt and anxiety and lust and jealousy and envy and despair and hatred and other such dis-relationships with our actual lives.

Some people distinguish shame from guilt by noting that we are ashamed before others while we are guilty before our own standards. When I am a guilty person, I do not care what others think about me; I am feeling guilty because I have not lived up to the standards which I expect of myself. Shame, however, is a relationship with others. When I am running around nude all alone, I may feel no shame. But when someone who is uncomfortable with such behavior catches sight of me doing such a thing, then I can feel shame.

I live in a society which shames many things. Some of them should be shamed, like murder, theft, violations of sexual covenants, false witness, etc. My society also shames aspects of life that might be considered by other societies as perfectly normal things. In my culture, a man wearing long hair was, at one time, thought shameful. Women wearing short skirts were likewise shamed, at one time.

To the extent that I have taken into my interior conditioning my society's shaming attitudes, I can feel shame relative to them. I can feel shame by simply anticipating being caught doing these things. I can even build a pool of shameful memories that I never, never tell anyone because to tell them would catapult me into an immediate experience of shame.

So with this view of shame in mind, let us contemplate Adam and Eve after they have already eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This story, contained in the second and third chapter of Genesis, tells us that Adam and Eve began hiding.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked; so they stitched fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze and hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He replied, "I heard the sound of you as you were walking in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself." God answered, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree which I forbade you?" (Genesis 3:7-11 New English translation)

We clearly have here an example of shame before the presence of the other. In this case, the Other is the Infinite. Some violation of an elemental prohibition made by the Infinite toward finite human beings has been breached and now humanity feels naked before the gaze of the Infinite and attempts to hide. Hiding from the Infinite, however, is not possible. Even a simple evening breeze shocks our wayward pair into an awareness of the Infinite “walking in the garden.”

I am delighted with this story for expressing the realization that the Infinite is not something far away. The Infinite walks in the garden. The Infinite comes every day like an auditor checking up on all transactions. “So where are you?” says the Infinite Auditor. “Hiding from you,” says the human. “Why?” says the Auditor, “Have you done the one thing I instructed you not to do?” “Yes,” says the human and goes on to describe what he hopes are extenuating circumstances. But the Eternal Auditor allows for no extenuating circumstances. The one thing that humans should not do has been done, and that doing results in dire consequences.

Well, what was that one thing, and why was it so bad, bad, BAD? They ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was not the tree of knowledge. This was not the tree of higher consciousness. This was not the tree of conscious-ness. Eating of this tree did not make them more conscious. It made them less conscious, or falsely conscious.

Before they ate, they were unashamed of their nakedness. After they ate, they were ashamed of their nakedness. This was not an advance in consciousness. This was a perversion of consciousness. Nakedness is a symbol for far more than simply being unclothed. Nakedness is a symbol for vulnerabilities of all sorts. Nakedness is also a symbol for our freedom, for our necessity to make decisions within the full ambiguities of living without certainty that our decisions are correct. We some-times call this “being exposed.” So, before they ate, they were unashamed of their vulnerability, their uncertainty, their freedom in the midst of life’s ambiguities. But after they ate, they were ashamed of this ethical exposure, of this elemental nakedness of freedom.

Not being exposed, not being free, (that is, having certainty) seemed good to Eve and so she ate some certainty and gave some certainty to her man, and he liked it too. Why did they desire this fruit, why did it taste good? Because certainty seemed to rid them of that primal anxiety which is also called “freedom.”

But certainty is a forbidden fruit. This was the case in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be the case. Certainty is forbidden to the human species. We have never had, we do not now have, and we will never have an absolutely valid knowledge of good and evil. Such knowledge is not granted to the finite human species.

So what does it mean to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? It means to commit an illusion. A BIG illusion, for the authors and arrangers of the book of Genesis placed the story of Adam and Eve at the very beginning of their theology of evil. They thereby implied that this eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the primal illusion, the primal violation of our relationship with the Infinite.

In his book, *Up from Eden*, Ken Wilber implies that the Adam and Eve story describes a step up from a lower stage of consciousness. But this is not the view of the Genesis theologians. In their view, Adam and Eve had not made a step up, but a false step, a step that symbolized the fundamental essence of all false steps in the history of human living.

So what is this false step? This story is about us as well as our distant ancestors. Adam and Eve’s false step is a step each of us still make. It is a familiar step. It is the step of making the axioms of our particular family, or our particular culture, or our particular religious group, or

our particular secular group into an absolute certainty. It means hiding in the trees of our particular gardens from the actuality that we do not have certainty and are forbidden to have it.

Every family teaches their children good and evil and expects them to do the good and avoid the evil. Every human culture does the same. Every religious group likewise teaches good and evil to its constituency. Does this Genesis lesson mean that we are not to do the good we are taught by these groups or that we are not to avoid the evil we are taught by these groups?

Certainly, we can take cognizance of the wisdom of our family, our culture, and our religious group and even follow that wisdom to a large extent. But here is the lie, the temptation to illusion: that some particular, humanly comprehensible ethical wisdom is final, certain, absolute--is the final word about whatever it is a word about. Our actual circumstance is ignorance of the knowledge of good and evil. And when we ignore that, we have eaten from the tree of which the Infinite has forbidden us to eat.

And when we have eaten, we look at ourselves and we discover that we have a nakedness that must be covered up. The covering of our physical bodies is a symbol for covering up our freedom, that freedom which knows that it is ignorant of any absolute knowledge of good and evil. This freedom--which we essentially are--knows that only the Infinite knows good and evil, that we, as finite beings, must make our choices in uncertainty--that we are not now nor shall we ever be "like God" knowing good and evil.

Now, why is committing this illusion about knowing good and evil so basic an error in human destiny? It is basic because it is a shift of our center of value from the Infinite to ourselves, a shift from the given actuality of our whole lives to some egoistic narrowness. This violating egoism may be a we-egoism involving our whole society. We frequently do not recognize that allowing our society, or our religion, to prescribe for us our center of value is a form of egoism. When my society is my center of value, I become an oppressor of all other social forms. When my religion is my center of value, I become a bigot of one sort or another, and this bigotry can lead to doing violence to all those who have a different way than I do of symbolizing their dialogue with the Infinite. When I think that I am certain, like God, I hide from my uncertainty and freedom and suppress others for being free. I insist that they conform to my God-like certainty. In so doing I have joined Adam and Eve in the primal fall.

This disobedience of Adam and Eve, according to the Genesis arrangement, leads to the envy of Cain and to the arrogance of those at Babel who wished to build a tower of social uniformity to the very heavens. All evil proceeds from this seemingly simple wrong step of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Eden is a symbol for human authenticity as a reality in our past from which we have fallen. But human authenticity is not simply past. The symbol, "the Kingdom of God," was prominent in first century Judaism and Christianity as a symbol for human authenticity as a possibility in the future. Salvation, as pictured by Jesus and Paul meant the coming of human authenticity in the present. So "Eden," "the Kingdom of God," and "salvation" all point to the same thing: human authenticity.

We can't go back to Eden, for the entry is guarded with a whirling and flaming sword. The meaning of this whirling and flaming sword, I believe, is that we are indeed barred from a past in which no fall has ever occurred. The route to authenticity now passes through an awareness of having fallen into evil. Yet Eden, as human authenticity, is not utterly gone: it is our continuing essential being, and that being, because it is still our actuality, convicts us of having fallen away from that actuality.

The apostle Paul is describing Eden when he describes the "freedom" to which he feels himself "called" as a result of the good news he preaches. This freedom Paul sees as a liberation

from society's laws and expectations, a liberation from slavery to our physical urges, a liberation from bondage to shame, guilt, anxiety, envy, greed, hatred, and the fear of death. If Eden is authenticity and freedom, then Eden can come again. Each of us are Eden as well as the fall from Eden.

When Eden is manifested socially, it appears as spirit-enriched culture, social justice, and ecological integrity. If Eden were to come for all of us in its fullness, then we, like my cat, would know no shame. But unlike my cat, we know about our fall into shame as well as some deliverances from our shameful living. Therefore, however much authenticity we may have recovered, we live somewhere to the east of Eden. And of this fall we are correct to be ashamed.

But shame is only the unavoidable pathway back to that Eden which knows no shame. If a criminal is not genuinely ashamed of his crimes, then there is no hope for his reclamation. But if he is ashamed of his crimes, then he is on the right path back to Eden. For the "Other" before whom we are all ashamed is none other than the Infinite God who walks in the finite garden of Eden.

But once more it must be said, that as we come back to Eden, we are aware that this new Eden is somewhat different from the very first Eden when no fall existed in the human memory. Now we do remember, with shame, all the centuries of falling, and we do know with deepened anxiety that we can fall again this afternoon.

3. The Tale of Two Religious Founders

Religious Founder A performed his ritual,
and Awe poured out in abundance.
Religious Founder C performed his ritual,
and nothing happened.
Religious Founder C observed Religious Founder A
and became angry and crestfallen.
Without pausing,
without detaching and observing,
without realizing that such feelings
are only passing experiences,
Religious Founder C killed Religious Founder A.

We remember the story of Cain and Abel as a story of two brothers in the human family. But we do not always notice that this story begins by telling us about the religious inventions that each of these brothers created.

Abel was a herder and created a religious invention involving animals and blood. Cain was an agriculturalist and created a religious invention involving the plants that he had cultivated. In this mythic story, we can see an allusion to an ancient conflict in human history. When agricultural civilizations arose, the close connections with nature that existed in tribal societies were replaced with dependencies upon those things which agricultural society was itself producing.

So we might view the Cain and Abel story in this manner: Abel, an allusion to tribal societies, created religious inventions that celebrated the Infinite as experienced in and through nature. Cain, an allusion to agricultural civilizations, created religious inventions that celebrated the creations of human beings. Now, of course Cain and his kind knew that plants grew by the power of some Infinite mystery, but in their religious inventions they began to give the credit to them-selves and they expected the Infinite mystery to cooperate with them in doing so.

In the biblical story, we see that the Infinite did not cooperate with Cain: which is to say, no Awe filled Cain's religious service. Some of us who have been rabbis, priests or preachers know this experience. We create some new liturgy or we preach some carefully crafted sermon, and it just lies there. Nothing happens. The congregation is not moved. The sanctuary is not filled with numinous energy. There is no spiritual thunder and lightning. Nothing. This is what happened to Cain.

This reminds me of a funny scene in the movie, "Little Big Man." The old Indian shaman had decided that it was time for him to die. He went out with his friend, Little Big Man, to a sacred spot, and did an elaborate ritual. At the end of the ritual, he lay down and expected his life to be taken up into the skies. But nothing happened. That is, the Infinite merely drizzled rain in his face; he did not die. So after some time, he got up, and as he and Little Big Man walked off into the horizon, the old Indian said, "Well, sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't."

But Cain, in the biblical story, does not take his religious failure so philosophical-ly. Cain looks over to the other hill, so to speak, and sees Abel performing a religious invention that the Infinite is honoring with all sorts of Awe. The congregation is swaying and swinging and swooning and screaming with the abundance of Awe that is being poured out on them.

Then we read what are perhaps the central lines of this story.

So Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain “Why are you angry and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.

But Cain does not master this lurking “desire.” He invites his brother into the field and kills him. What would it have meant for Cain to have mastered this impulse? And what was this lurking impulse?

Cain had not done a good ritual, so the Infinite has not accepted his celebration. There was nothing wrong going on here. The Infinite said so, “If you do it right, you will get a different result.”

The Infinite also warned Cain, if you don't get it right, you are going to experience some strong feelings and thoughts about your failure, and those feelings and those thoughts are going to “desire” that you act them out as if they were the real truth that needs to be obeyed here. But the real truth is that you must pause, name these impulses for what they are, just feelings and thoughts that will pass away. You must see, that as a criteria for action, these feelings and thoughts are untrustworthy.

But Cain responded differently, “My religion is as good as anyone else's; if my brother's religion is being accepted and mine is not, well then kill that embarrassing little squirt.” So he did.

Now the Genesis theologians are very clear that there was no excuse for Cain doing this. He was not just “being human.” He could have “mastered” this passing impulse to kill. He could have learned something from Abel and tried his ritual again. He could have been grateful to his brother for figuring out something that he did not know.

But Cain, like Adam and Eve, was eating from the forbidden tree. He wanted to believe that his religious invention, his knowledge of good and evil was the truth. So in this illusion of possessing a truth he did not possess, he became intolerant of anyone whose simple successes implied that Cain's life was a joke, an illusion, a poor doing. So by his actions Cain said, “My way of living is good enough for me, and any person who implies otherwise is a bad person. I know what is good and evil. And I accept no humiliations of my perspective.”

Surely each of us, from time to time, has experienced this temptation. Rather than understanding that humiliation is always the pathway to enlightenment, we prefer to be the defenders of whatever beliefs and feelings we now have. We do not really understand that all beliefs and feelings are just surface experiences. The real truth is always deeper than any feeling or conceptualized truth. The real truth is not a belief or a feeling; the real truth will invariably entail the frustration of many of our beliefs and feelings. The sort of truth I mean is articulated in the Cain and Abel story: the Infinite mystery asks Cain (and asks us) to pause and observe calmly our beliefs and feelings from a distant place, to see their limitations, to see them rise and flow and pass away, to see them as clues perhaps to the truth of our lives, but only clues, not the truth itself. To hear the full truth, we have to still our thoughts and feelings. We have to step back and get a wider perspective on the situation. The full truth of our lives includes the capacity to pause and get perspective. It is a lie that we must always act on our feelings. It is a lie that we must always defend our beliefs. Indeed, this is the truth: there is no excuse whatsoever for following the immediate urges of our thoughts and feelings. Such living is always false; it compounds falsity on the top of falsity on top of falsity.

When anyone tells you that they had to act or have to act on their feelings, that they feel things so strongly that they cannot pause and observe those feelings and see them for what they are, they lie. We are not slaves to our thoughts and feelings. We are freedom, and it is with our freedom that we choose to be slaves or not to be slaves to our passing thoughts and feelings. Choosing to self-consciously be this profound freedom may be scary, and uncertain, and dreadful, and unsatisfying, and humiliating, and downright hard work, but such choosing is choosing the truth, the truth of our essential freedom.

Cain did not choose the truth, he gave in to the urgings of his impulses. And this was his evil. His feelings and thoughts were not evil, they were just the sort of feelings and thoughts that one has when one is rejected. What was evil was his choice. He chose to allow his feelings and thoughts to choose his action. He was not being his essential freedom. He was being impulsive. He did not “master” his feelings and thoughts. He allowed his feelings and thoughts to “master” him. I do not believe that the Genesis authors, in using the term “master,” meant to recommend the sort of over-control of our feelings that so many of us practice today. “Master” need not mean “suppress” or “not experience” our feelings. “Master,” in the context of this story, means being aware that our freedom and our impulses are two different dynamics. Freedom means detachment from our impulses. Freedom means the choice to go along with or not go along with our impulses.

So what is the root cause of murder, according to this story? The choice to not be free! The choice to be controlled by our impulses! “Uncontrollable passion” is a fiction made up by guilty human beings. Every murder is an act of passion, a passion we chose to give in to. When we murder it is because some frustration, some anger, some crestfallenness, some envious impulse has implied the action of killing someone, and we gave in to that impulse. In the midst of this intense feeling, a choice was made: either the choice to master these feelings with our freedom or the choice to allow our freedom to be mastered by these impulses. A human being is not “naturally impulsive.” The natural state of humanity is freedom. So what was the “evil” that was lurking at Cain’s door? It was the yet-to-be-made choice to be impulsive. This lurking choice could have been mastered--that is, not made. That was the warning the Infinite Silence was saying to the angry, crestfallen Cain.

Now killing someone in self defense is not the same as the murder Cain committed. Killing in defense of a homeland may not always be murder in Cain’s sense. Killing is not exactly the same as murder. Murder is a violation of the truth about life, a slavery to egoism. Killing someone may sometimes be a responsible act of freedom. This truth about life is frequently fogged up by our pacifistic idealism. The ethics of the Genesis authors is not a simplistic pacifism which overlooks the interior dynamics of evil and makes evil only an objective action. The ethics of the Genesis authors is rooted in an awareness of interior freedom, and therefore, of responsibility and irresponsibility.

Cain’s action was not a responsible act of killing. Cain’s action was irresponsibility. It was a loss of freedom. It was murder. And so the truth of Cain’s irresponsibility was proclaimed by Abel’s blood crying out from the Earth.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know: am I my brother’s keeper?” And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”

The term “keeper” may be an allusion to Abel’s profession, a herder. A herder loves his

animals and takes care of each one. But Cain is a grower of vegetables and perhaps treats both animals and vegetables indifferently. Cain is a new style of humanity, not so in tune with the natural world. Abel had taken one of his precious and beloved animals and sacrificed it as part of his ritual. This had created Awe. The Infinite had honored Abel's ritual. Now giving in to his anger and crestfallenness, Cain had chosen to do a blood sacrifice as well. But again, Cain's action did not create Awe, it created something quite opposite to the courageous willingness to be in Awe in the presence of the Awesome. But Cain's blood sacrifice of Abel did, according to this story, come to the attention of the Infinite, and the Infinite brought it to Cain's attention, not as a constructive religious act but as a curse. This curse is expressed in the Genesis story in this rather cryptic fashion.

When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." Then the Lord said to him "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven fold vengeance." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The story makes clear that murder, like eating the forbidden tree, creates consequences. It moves one out of the garden of innocence and places one in a struggle with the Infinite. Cain "settled" in the land of Nod, so perhaps he remained a farmer, but he is still a fugitive and a wanderer from his real home. He is no longer friendly with the earth. And it seems to him that the earth is no longer friendly with him. Furthermore, the Infinite is no longer mediated to him through the nature that surrounds him. He has moved away from the presence of the Infinite. Cain has only one connection with the Infinite left, the mark on his forehead.

And what is that mark all about? It was some kind of protection against being killed. Cain had killed Abel, and now he imagines that everyone and anyone might very likely kill him, especially since he is an uprooted person, far to the east of the garden where the Infinite walks. And Cain is correct; he had by his act of murder created a more violent world in which his own life is in greater jeopardy.

But though Cain has separated himself from the Infinite, the Infinite has maintained a relationship with Cain. The Infinite has marked Cain's forehead. I first pictured that mark as some sort of black spot, sort of like an Ash Wednesday smear, but I don't know why violent men meeting Cain would be turned aside by such a mark. Or perhaps it was a big blue discoloration of the skin--real ugly, making Cain look super-dangerous. No, these directions of thought yield very little. Something more symbolic is clearly meant. Cain's consciousness has been altered. Perhaps Cain is protected by his awareness that human beings are capable of what he is capable. Perhaps Cain is protected by the lesson he himself is to other people, namely, murder does not better your life.

Perhaps the authors of the Genesis stories simply wanted to say that agricultural civilizations, whom Cain represents, are established by violence and that this violent establishment both protects the civilization and represents the manner in which civilization is estranged from the garden of human authenticity. The way back for civilized humanity--the way back to the garden where the Infinite walks--is through the mark on Cain's forehead. This is the remaining connection between Cain and the Infinite, ***guilty of the violence to Abel that Cain did.***

Civilizations are still violent to tribal peoples. The disrespect of civilizations for tribal forms of society has often moved into a frenzy of killing. The treatment of the native American population by civilized Europeans seems almost incomprehensible to any half-way compassionate person. What is this rage about? Is it not possible that civilized humanity with its developed narrowness about what is good and what is evil, feels audited by the presence of a

tribal humanity which has not lost its close connections with nature and with the Infinite who walks in the garden of nature? Is it not possible that the Cain of civilization is still killing the Abel of tribal society and doing so by giving in to the very same impulses?

The blood of tribal peoples, living and dead, is still crying out from the earth. Consciousness about the guilt of killing Abel is still a mark on the forehead of civilized humanity. And this mark of guilt is the way that the Infinite is being gracious to Cain. Cain abandoned the Infinite to celebrate the works of his own hands, but the Infinite never turned loose of Cain; the Infinite holds on to Cain by finding him guilty of killing Abel. To the extent that civilized humanity, even today, owns this guilt, civilized humanity is taking a step forward toward being reconnected with nature and with the Infinite who walks in the garden each evening when the wind blows.

Separation from nature has been Cain's punishment for thousands of years. Perhaps this story's greatest message to our era is the awareness that becoming civilized and killing Abel were one and the same act. We civilized people constantly and arrogantly assume that we are an advance in consciousness over tribal peoples. There are ways in which it is true that civilization has been an advance in human consciousness, but something else is also true. Civilized humanity killed off tribal humanity and turned their descendants into obedient peasants in order to own and harvest wider and wider lands. We who are civilized humanity cannot return to the homeland of human authenticity until we notice this mark of guilt on our foreheads and realize that the Infinite has been protecting us and remaining connected to us through this mark.

I can hear my Sunday school teachers complaining that nothing so complicated as all this was implied by the Cain and Abel story. "This story," I can hear them say, "is simply about not hitting your baby brother." "True," say a chorus of pacifists, "the meaning of this story is simple: it says don't kill another human being."

But such simplistic moral lessons are clearly not the focus of this ancient story. The story does not condemn killing in general, for Abel killed one of his precious animals in the ritual that the Infinite honored. Similarly, the story is not about the ambiguities of warfare and police action. It has nothing to say about the circumstances in which a fully responsible person should be willing to take another life. This story is about murder and about the underlying frustration, anger, crestfallen-ness, and envy that lead to murder. Yes, and this story is about the loss of connection with the Infinite and with nature. This story is about probing a deep secret in the soul of civilized humanity. We have been willing to kill uncivilized forms of humanity because they were not like us and because they were indeed an audit of our lives, showing us to be persons separated from nature and from the Infinite who walks in the garden and says, "Where are you?" and "What have you done?" Those questions revealing our shame and guilt, are connecting links with the Infinite, links that still remain after we have broken our relationship with the Infinite and have allowed our angry and crestfallen feelings to run our lives. These questions are like an enduring mark on our foreheads, a mark that reminds us that we have taken the brother who audits our lives out into the field and slain him.

And this story is not simply about some very old guilt, one that happened a long, long time ago. No, no, no, this is a story about the soul of Adolf Hitler and his throng of followers who found their Jewish brothers and sisters such a strange threat to their dignity. This is the story of Joseph Stalin and his throng of followers who found every opponent of their ideals a category of person worthy of liquidation. This is the story of the betrayal, contempt, and conquest of the North American native peoples by civilized Europeans. This is a story about ruthless political leaders and their loyal fans in nation after nation across the face of our planet. This story is

about the economic tyranny which we who are rich impose on us who are poor. The story of Cain and Abel is still happening today.

This disturbing story leaves us with these crucial questions: How is it that I am Abel being killed by my brother Cain? And how is it that I am Cain killing my brother Abel? Perhaps we can see more clearly the personal daily truth of this ancient story if we picture Abel (and ourselves) as a local community of people celebrating our unity with the natural environment of which we are a living part. Awe is present in this ritual. A wind of clean connectedness to the fullness of life blows through this group of us humans. Over on the next hilltop let us picture Cain (also ourselves) performing a ritual of enthrallment with automobiles, jet planes and computers. No Awe is attending this ritual. Our enthrallment with these works of our own hands just lies there: no energy is added to our ritual by the Infinite Silence. In fact, our heads feel rattled and our souls are arid.

Then, as Cain, we look over to other hill and see Abel, a community of people filled with the bliss of human authenticity. Our face falls, we become angry. And the temptation to act upon this frustration and anger lurks at our door. But instead of mastering this lurking unmade choice, we choose to envy the life of this authentically connected Abel community. And, because of our envy, we look for a way to kill this life. We go over to Abel's hill and explain to those people that they are naive and uncivilized. We tell them that hugging trees and coddling wild life is silly, that industrial growth is what is important, that computers, jet planes, and automobiles are the glory and the greatness that we should be celebrating. Perhaps we call the police (or some thugs we know) to come and beat them up. Perhaps we are those thugs ourselves.

We still have much to learn about how solving the fundamental maladies of our times means reempowering local communities and finding in those local communities balance with nature and communion with the Infinite who walks in the garden of nature. But perhaps we can see that empowered, ecologically sensitive local communities, while Infinitely honored, like Abel, are clearly threatened by the Cain of industrial civilization. Yes, if we now look hard into the actuality of our times, we see that Cain, in the form of the national, transnational and multinational corporations, is ruling the destiny of the world at Abel's expense. We have only recently learned to tell this story vividly: how we civilized people acting as corporation owners, managers, workers, and customers are making sacrifices to the powerful gods of success and prosperity, growth and glory, and defending our rituals by holding in contempt locally rooted peoples--giving economically rationalized reasons for our destruction of their communal values and the natural communities in which they dwell. In this story, Abel, as locally rooted community, is performing the best rituals. The Infinite Silence is honoring local community and the natural environment. Spiritually speaking, the corporations are being out-performed by any local community who genuinely loves its geographical place. As we--being the owners, managers, employees, and customers of the corporations--become more conscious of the true dynamics of our history, we may become crestfallen and angry. Perhaps we, as the civilized Cain, will find ourselves choosing to be envious of Abel, the authentic local community. Perhaps we will notice our unmade choices to slay Abel. Perhaps we will notice that, in this story, we have already been slaying Abel for hundreds of years.

In both our social and personal lives, the Cain and Abel story is about every instance of frustration in which we, crestfallen and angry about the happier state of some another person, feel like killing someone. The desire to act on these feelings is lurking at the door. Yet evil (or sin) is not these strong feelings, but the "desire" to act on these feelings. And this desire is not a compulsion or a necessity, but an unmade decision, the decision to act on our feelings--the decision to act in frustrated envy. Being disappointed, crestfallen and angry are simply natural

feelings, part of our good nature, but evil lurks in the unmade decision to act upon these feelings. In our essential beings, we have the ability to master this lurking evil, but we do not always do so. And if I do not do so, I and I alone am to blame. My parents are not to blame. My society is not to blame. My “human nature” is not to blame. I am.

Yes, Cain is still slaying Abel. And there is no excuse for it. Human beings doing this murderous behavior are not just “being human.” We human beings are choosing to be slaves of our passing impulses rather than pausing and observing our frustrations, angers, and crestfallennesses calmly and then choosing in freedom to act upon the truth of our own deep freedom. Yes, this is who we essentially are, the freedom to be who we are in our own situations, the freedom to deal with our limitations rather than focus in envy on someone else’s better state. Our “need” to act in impassioned impulsiveness upon such envy is a lie. Our happiness does not lie in that direction.

And let us be ruthlessly honest. We are all Cain. We have all committed our murders. We may not have committed a crime by the laws of our society, but we have all acted impulsively in ways that kill. And we all participate in societies that slaughter needlessly. So all of us, everyone of us, bear the mark of Cain on our foreheads. We also dwell in the land of Nod, east of Eden, far from the garden where the Infinite Silence still walks and talks with us through every rustle of the wind.

4. Living in the Midst of Catastrophe

The story of Noah and the flood is, like the story of Cain and Abel, a myth about the operation of evil. In the Cain and Abel story, we see the authors of Genesis alluding to the social reality of evil but examining directly the subjectivity of evil in the psyche of the singular person. In the flood story, these writers and arrangers of Genesis take on the social dimension of evil explicitly.

Water was, in the minds of the Genesis authors, associated with chaos. They saw water under the Earth waiting to spout forth. They saw water over the earth ready to rain down. They saw the great oceans restless to leap out of their bounds and cover the land. They saw the rivers rise and wash away farms and cities. Flooding was their primal image of catastrophe.

The Genesis authors also envisioned the Infinite Silence as a protective Actor who, day by day, kept the waters of chaos in their proper places and gave humanity some dry land to live on. And when the waters of chaos leapt out of their bounds and flooded their lives, they saw this also as an Action of that same Infinite Silence who was envisioned as speaking to them in this gift of tragedy, for these authors believed that every actuality was a gift of the Infinite Silence. Furthermore, they were grappling with trusting the Infinite Silence--with hearing the Infinite Silence speak to them, each day of their living, this foundational speech: "All actuality is good."

The flood is good. Catastrophe is good. If evil exists, it is human evil. The action of the Invisible Silence is good, justified, and righteous altogether. Strange as this view may seem to our human-centered value systems, this was the view of the Biblical writers.

Now, sometimes the biblical writers were simplistic in the manner in which they linked human evil with a given catastrophe. Clearly, it is not true that the happening of every tornado, hurricane, or flood can be explained in terms of some specific human evil this catastrophe came to punish. As the book of Job so lucidly explores, some catastrophes are simply unexplainable in this manner. We do not live in a simplistic moral universe. Sometimes the only ethical explanation we can make of a given catastrophe is that this action of the Infinite Silence is totally mysterious, that is, not explainable by any ethical viewpoint of the human mind.

Nevertheless, it is also true that some catastrophes can be fairly clearly linked with the build-up of unrealistic and irresponsible human actions. So let us assume, for the moment, that the Great Flood in the book of Genesis is a metaphor for those kinds of catastrophes which are indeed linked to human agency.

And further, let us assume that when the Genesis authors put together their theology of evil in the first 11 chapters of this grand anthology of ancient legends, they synthesized all the flood stories they had ever heard into one huge flood story, a flood of such magnificence that it destroyed virtually all human and animal life. A remnant of human life and a remnant of animal life had always survived every flood, but in this Big Mother of all floods, only one boatload of humans and animals survived. This one family, this last group who still walked with God, were told beforehand about the coming catastrophe and were given the assignment to build a saving ark and to take with them a male-female pair of each mammal, reptile and bird. It is wonderful what you can do in a story that you cannot do in real life. To have actually taken every species of animal life and enough food for a 150 day trip would have necessitated a boat the size of, say, Japan. But in this story, Noah and his family got their whole zoo on board a three-deck boat made of ribs of cypress, reeds and pitch, about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet deep. No details were given in this story as to how this incredible menagerie was housed and fed, or how they disposed of waste products. Clearly, these myth writers were not trying to write a story

that sounded plausible. They were doing theology. I picture them saying something like this: "Look, let us imagine a flood that out-floods every flood, and in terms of this picture, let us examine the dynamics that are operative when catastrophe is happening."

First of all, here is an aspect in the theology of these Genesis authors that is often overlooked: these authors were intent on having Noah save not only a remnant of humanity but a remnant of every animal, wild and domesticated, clean and unclean. No questions were asked about which animals would be useful to humans. No considerations were given to getting rid of poisonous snakes or some other objectionable beast. All animals were chosen to ride the boat. Two of every species. No living form was to be lost.

Such a joining together of humanity with the rest of the earth's animal life is a most interesting theme in this story. The writers of this story felt that preserving a remnant of humanity needed to include preserving a remnant of all the other animals of nature. Indeed, it had been true that animal life, as well as human life, had come through all the previous catastrophes of earth history. So it was clearly part of the invisible plan of the Infinite Silence to provide the human species with animal companionship.

A second aspect of the theology in this flood story is contained in this question: why, in the minds of these myth writers, had this stupendous flood happened in the first place? It was not the animals' fault. It was not nature's fault. It was linked to human corruption. The human race, according to this story, had come to have thoughts and inclinations that were only evil, indeed humanity had become so corrupt and so violent that The Infinite Silence said "I am sorry that I made humanity." The entire world had become so bad that only one family group still "walked with God" in the garden of nature.

Perhaps you have felt that way about the world at times. I have. The surge of nationalism that spawned World War II comes to me as that sort of all-consuming madness of human evil. The nationalisms of Germany, Italy and Japan, which initiated these tragic conflicts, still seem to me overwhelming examples of human corruption. And the Allies who defeated these nationalisms were not guiltless of nationalism themselves. It was certainly a selfish U.S. nationalism that argued against getting involved in this War. And this same selfish U.S. nationalism argued later that we should enter this war to protect our interests. Only a small number of those who favored fighting in this horrible war did so to end all nationalism. So, it is understandable to me how we might say that this horrible war came to punish the human race for its nationalism. Whatever human motives went into starting and conducting this catastrophe, the Infinite Silence meant it for good, the good of ending nationalism everywhere upon this planet. And by "ending nationalism" I mean recognizing in a brand new fashion the good of being a planet-wide interrelationship of peoples.

Here is a second, and perhaps even more pointed example of how catastrophe and human corruption can be closely linked. Our currently increasing ecological crisis can be viewed as the result of a deep and all-consuming corruption of the human species. We are almost madly stampeding to the cliff of doom. In terms of this impending catastrophe, very few are those who humbly walk with the Infinite Silence in the garden of nature. And it makes sense to me to say that those few are being asked by the Infinite Silence to build an ark. By "build an ark" I mean create a new style of being human on this planet, so that when the flood comes (and it will surely come) at least a remnant of the human and natural populations will survive and go on to establish a human presence that is viable as a manner of human living upon this planet.

For us modern peoples, water may not be our primal image of catastrophe. Perhaps our images of catastrophe center more in the images of fire, explosions, gunfire, mushroom clouds, hot winds and blinding radiation that blow and burn everything in their path. Perhaps

hurricanes and tornadoes, earthquakes and volcanoes also fill out our montage of catastrophe images. The modern movie industry has, I believe, made catastrophe movies on every possible theme. Perhaps those of us who go to such movies, do so primarily to experience the awe we feel in the presence of these vastly powerful phenomena. Such awe is one of our linkages with the Infinite. And each self-aware human being is a relationship with this all-powerful Infinity. So real-world catastrophes, whenever and wherever they occur, get our attention and the attention of our news media. Catastrophes, now and thousands of years ago, draw the attention of the human species. And this attention is part of our experience of the Infinite Silence.

What does it mean to live in the awareness that catastrophe is part of our lives and of our impending futures? Well, it means first of all to give up our naivete that some Supreme Being is protecting us from such experiences. The Infinite Silence is indeed protecting us from catastrophe if we are indeed being protected, but the Infinite Silence is also the power we are meeting and are going to meet in the happening of each catastrophe.

So what is the Infinite Silence saying to us in these catastrophic happenings and impending happenings? Each of us, I insist, is capable of being an amateur prophet who proclaims what we hear the Infinite Silence saying. (And there are no professional prophets who know for certain what the Infinite Silence is saying.) So let me speak for the Infinite Silence relative to the ecological catastrophe which is already in process and is wildly increasing its devastating momentum.

Hear, oh nations of the Earth, all governmental agencies,
all nongovernmental agencies,
and all private citizens:
a flood of doom is fast approaching.

And what is this doom? What does this "flood" look like? Our ecological flood is strange and hard for many people to assimilate. It is not water, or fire, or wind, or warfare. It is quiet, gradual, mostly invisible. Here are some of the characteristics of our flood:

- By the lowest estimates, 30,000 species of life are wiped out forever each year. This is a rate comparable with the die-off rate at the time of dinosaurs.
- Forest cover is shrinking at the rate of about 27,181,000,000 acres per year.
- Topsoil on crop land is being worn out and/or washed away at the rate of 26,000,000,000 tons per year in excess of new soil formation.
- Carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are rising steadily and are projected to raise the mean temperature several degrees in the next century leading to untold atmospheric disturbances, greatly increased deserts, and a rise in sea level as much as 7 feet drowning many islands and seacoasts.
- The oceans, vast as they are, are being extensively over-fished with our technological wizardry.
- And what do we say about the steady increase in sundry forms of pollution of the fresh water we bathe in and drink, of the air we breathe, of the land that feeds us? With clean-ups much slower than build-ups, our waste disposal piles grow and grow. These silent monsters are poised to ooze, and sometimes dump, their poisons on unsuspecting communities. In many places, this is already happening at completely intolerable levels.

And so on and so on and so on. If we want documentation for such facts, it is readily available.²

This is our flood, our strange flood today. Though we may be weary of hearing about it, it is the most ominous catastrophe that has ever been faced by the human species. It comes the closest, of all the awful events that have ever happened, to matching the horrific dimensions of Noah's fictitious flood.

And what human evil, what corruption of the human species is linked with this flood?

The primary human cause of our ever increasing ecological crises is the inappropriate growth of inappropriate technologies all for the sake of making some people inappropriately wealthy and the rest of us inappropriately sedated and/or powerless and starving. This pattern characterizes our expanding use of fossil fuels, forests, crop lands, oceans, metals, and other basic resources.

A secondary, but very important cause, of the ecological crisis is the continuing "explosion" of the human population. This cause is secondary because it is the insecurity caused by the primary cause that encourages desperate people to have more and more children in the hope that some of them will survive to care for the parents in their elder years. As people gain the security to believe that one or two children will live to adulthood, they stop having so many children. The population explosion is also a secondary cause because it is supported by the falsely perceived need of the ownership class for cheap labor and plentiful consumers to buy products.

Secondary or not, when the population explosion is joined with the primary corruption of inappropriate industrial growth, we experience food, energy and resource shortages becoming extensive. And these pressing shortages combine with human fears, selfishness and individualism to create an increasingly massive distribution crisis which tends to serve the haves and neglect the have-nots.

And the momentum for all these interrelated crises is being sustained by a runaway economic system over which there is no effective political control. The pools of wealth, which own and operate this economic system, almost entirely control our existing political systems as well as the educational and information systems that shape our mindsets.

This central predicament is further aggravated by:

- (1) the popularly accepted notion that the path to the good life is individualistically climbing some economic success ladder to more and more individual power and desire satisfaction.
- (2) the notion that I must identify with, defend, and promote my cultural-religious-racial in-group above all others.
- (3) an emotional security panic among most men and many women that is maintaining the second place status of women and the under-development of the feminine components of our humanness.
- (4) the eclipse of our natural connections and our Spiritual deeps by an overemphasis on efficient mental performance.

²I have taken my figures from articles in the annual *State of the World* volumes published by World-watch Institute. Some of these figures may have changed slightly but the overall picture has not.

If this brief sketch is an approximately accurate picture of the actuality of our impending doom and of the actuality of the human agency (that is, the evil) that is linked with this impending catastrophe, what might be our response? That is, what human response is adequate to the extent of the impending catastrophe and to the gravity of the human corruptions that are linked with this catastrophe?

The Effective Strategy is to build an Ark.

And here are the instructions on how to build an ark, instructions I have heard from the Infinite Silence: (I am, in a way, playing a game here; my prophetic utterances will surely be improved with further thought and experience, but I ask you to test these assertions with your own experience and see if these directions are not true, true in the same sense that it was true for Noah to build the ark.)

1. Massive reeducation relative to the above predicament, its causes, and the effective strategy for its correction. What a job we have to do simply to wake up local citizens to a full realization of their danger, their powerlessness, and the reasons for it!

2. The disenfranchisement of wealth from the decision-making process and the establishment of effective channels of political power for ordinary citizens. Even to make small steps in campaign finance reform meets major obstacles in the U.S.A. What if we seriously sought to referee the economic playing field with rules that derived from actual, local, human and ecological needs?

3. The seed-by-seed planting of a new economy as the old economy is composted. It will clearly not be enough to dismantle the unrestrained power of our oppressive network of national, transnational and multinational corporations; we will need to build a new economy, one that is more democratic and responsive to those who work and live and buy.

4. The cultural and political empowerment of local neighborhoods and county-sized bodies in preparation for movement toward ecologically sensitive regional governance and the decentralization of most nation-state functions. Local people are presently passive and see no way to make a significant difference. And they seldom experience leadership who are even seeking for a way to empower them.

5. The maturation of whole new systems of local to global polity, economics, and culture. Fresh answers to almost every aspect of human society must be invented and established in working order in the course of a century.

These five tasks are certainly overwhelming, but this is the ark which we must build. If we do these five actions soon enough, some portion of the human species and some portion of the animal life on this planet will survive. Some of our neighbors will laugh at us as we build this ark, just as people must have laughed at Noah. Some will claim that there is no ecological crisis, just as some must have told Noah that there was no need for his ark in its waterless place. Some will not join the work of ark construction because they are too busy repairing unrepairable social forms or enjoying unsustainable forms of indulgence, just as people in the time of Noah went on working and reveling right up until the time when Noah and his family and all the animals entered the ark.

Let us continue this exercise of our imagination: let us contemplate the day that Noah came out of the ark. What a messy moment! The flood had surely left the rotting bodies of animals and human beings strewn all over, and no garbage systems or transportation systems or

communications systems or economic systems or political systems or educational systems were functioning. Noah and his family were so very few, yet they, and they alone, had to clean up this mess and put into operation all the necessary systems of human society.

Noah, being a fictitious character in an oversimplified situation, had a big advantage over us. His task was clear. Build a boat, ride out the flood, turn the animals loose, organize the human survivors, move the dead bodies out of the way, and start supper. None of those things were easy, but the task was clear.

In our complex, real-time, historical situation, the ark is not a simple boat; it is an entire new society growing in numbers within the existing powerful, but obsolete and unsustainable, forms of society. And our old society and all its wickedness will not die off in 40 days. It will, in the best case scenario, die off slowly over many decades. And our new society will not start with a clean slate, it will have to grow slowly within an old and messy world order still somewhat intact. This new society will take people and wisdoms and institutional forms from the old society and transform them into a different mode of being human society. This more appropriate or sustainable society will grow until it contains the appropriate number of human beings and the appropriate number of animals for living on this finite planet. Meanwhile death will also be happening to all the old obsolete institutions and ways of life. And let us face this clearly: death will be happening to people. When the sustainable society is at last complete, there will be less people on the Earth than dwell here today. The flood will indeed have come.

It is understandable if we feel uncomfortable with the extensive tragedy that will be part of this transition to a sustainable society. But comfort for everyone is not one of the options we confront. We have these two options: (1) total extinction of the human species, or (2) the survival of an ark-full of new human society and some of the animals. The old forms of society, along with billions of their support-ers and innocent members, will, even in the best case scenario, pass into oblivion. I do not intend by this to be saying something angry or bitter or crass. I am simply trying to be sober about the way the real world actually operates.

The authors of the Noah myth knew that life on earth was tragic in this unavoidable way, but they viewed such tragedy as meaningful. They saw the flood in their story as having washed the Earth clean for a fresh start. They did not weep sentimentally for the drowning masses. They did not curse the Infinite Silence for killing all those animals. They looked real life in the face and affirmed it. Yet, in their imaginations, they also joined Noah on the top of that mountain and viewed that rainbow. They felt they heard the Infinite Silence say that this was the last time such a flood would ever occur. They felt that they lived in the midst of a promise that the Infinite Silence would contain the waters of chaos and provide dry land for the human species and all our animal companions.

But these authors of Genesis also knew that catastrophes of a lesser sort than this fictitious, horrific flood were an inevitable part of human living. They do, I believe, support me and you in facing affirmatively the catastrophes which you and I must face in our future as we build a new ark to save some of our grandchildren and some of the animals from the strange ecological floods that are surely coming to sweep away the obsolete modes of living and many innocent and not-so-innocent people who are caught up in those old modes.

These relationships toward tragedy and catastrophe do not imply that we cannot or should not do all that we can to mitigate tragedy wherever and whenever we can. Surely it would be best if we could make the great transitions that lie ahead with a minimum of suffering for all of us. But the ways of Yahweh are not our ways. We must not project upon our cosmic meaning screen some Super Being who, like many of us, is a sentimental humanist. The Infinite Silence

brings to be and brings not to be and seems to be equally capable and pleased to do both. We violate the view of the Genesis authors when we try to foist upon them a God whom we have created in our own image. When these authors asserted that we were created in Yahweh's image, they were not saying something about the nature of Yahweh, they were saying something about the nature of humanity, namely that we are capable of a personal relationship with the Infinite Silence and of mirroring that relatedness in all of our practical living. They did not trust in magical help from some fictitious benevolence, from that "nice-to-humans God" which so many of us project on our cosmic meaning screen. The authors of Genesis would have agreed with this paraphrase of Mohammed, "There are no gods, PERIOD , except the Infinite Silence which brings all things to be and all things not to be."

I am grateful for the Noah story. It tells us something basic about the meaning-fulness of tragedy and the essence of human evil. It tells us, for example, that our humanistic sentimentality is part of the corruption that needs to be washed away. It tells us something elemental about social change, about its tragedy and its hope. And finally, the Noah story tells us something foundational about the ongoing trustworthiness of the Infinite Silence.

5. The Hidden Aim of Uniformity

In the eleventh chapter of the book of Genesis, the authors of this carefully crafted anthology of myths and legends complete their theology of evil. They complete it with the story of the tower of Babel. Because the details of this story are less familiar than the others, and because the whole story is quite short, I include it here as my opening poem for this chapter.

Once upon a time, all the world spoke a single language and used the same words. As men journeyed to the east, they came to a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them hard;" they used bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar. "Come," they said, "let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves; or we shall be dispersed all over the earth." Then the LORD came down to see the city and tower which mortal men had built, and he said, "Here they are, one people with a single language, and now they have started to do this; henceforth nothing they have in mind to do will be beyond their reach. Come let us go down there and confuse their speech, so that they will not understand what they say to one another." So the LORD dispersed them from there all over the earth, and they left off building the city. That is why it is called Babel, because the LORD there made a babble of the language of all the world; from that place the LORD scattered men all over the face of the earth. (Genesis 11:1-9 New English translation)

Now, at first, we might be inclined to dismiss the importance of this story, claiming that it was merely a fable about why we humans have so many different languages and why we are scattered all over the earth instead of living in one big society.

But as we meditate longer on this story, we come to realize that this impulse to construct one big society is still being promoted by people today. So let us ask ourselves, why not have one language and certainly one number system, one system of measurements, one economic system, one formulation of law and order, one amalgamation of cultural meanings, one ethics, even one religion perhaps? Why not be more uniform? Would it not be easier to function if we got together and did everything pretty much the same way?

As we continue to mediate on this story, we notice that the story spells out why the citizens of Babel wished to be more uniform. It was so they could build their society bigger, indeed build it to the very heavens, and thereby make a name for themselves.

I live in the state of Texas, where many of us still retain an exaggerated view of being bigger and better than other states. Some Texans even resent slightly that Alaska has joined the United States, but since Alaska is so far away and so cold and so sparsely populated, Texans can still harbor the notion that Texas is really the biggest and the best.

I also live in the United States where many of us relish being the most powerful nation on the planet. One of the factors that makes it possible for the United States to be a global power is contained in that word "United." Unlike Europe where many different languages exist, many different cultures, many money systems, many distinct ways of being socially organized, we in the United States have one language (or at least some of us feel we ought to have one language), one money, one national constitution to which state constitutions are subservient, one highway system, one economy, one legal system, one culture (to the extent that a melting pot of other cultures can be one culture).

Even though the United States is not, strictly speaking, "one culture," many of our citizens have wished to think so. Clearly we have on our shores some cultural elements that have never been willing to fully join the stew of our overall melting pot of European cultures. Many Native

American groups, in spite of our strong pressures on them to disappear, are still undissolved rocks in our soup. And those residents who now want to be called African-Americans, also refuse to culturally dissolve in the fullest sense. Hispanic and Oriental sub-groups are also viewed as fouling up our uniformity.

Nevertheless, compared to the patchwork of languages and cultures that characterizes Europe (and a lot of other areas of the world), we in the United States have made a name for ourselves by promoting a uniform, efficiently operating, large social system that can, therefore, be the foremost power on the planet. With space travel, we even have our head in the sky. Even though we may not claim to have our heads in the “ultimate” heavens, we do, many of us, wish to view ourselves as the very finest nation on the face of the Earth. Such attitudes are clearly arrogant and illusory.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to demean the good qualities of the United States. We do have a relatively successful experiment in democracy: if not perfect, at least a helpful model applicable to many other places we might name. We do have a capacity for getting things done, an openness to new truth, a dedication to individual rights, opportunities, and happiness not found everywhere on Earth. So what is so bad about uniformity, especially if that uniformity is the sort of uniformity constructed by and for the “United” States?

Let us admit that a good word can be said for some types of uniformity. We probably do not need a different system of measurements for every state, or a different type of money in every county. It is convenient to speak the same language over a large expanse of geography. A consistent, wide-spread definition of law and order may also have many practical values. But as we begin to expand this notion of uniformity to the arenas of basic life style, religion, education, adapting meaningfully to local geography, and many other important matters, uniformity is not unambiguously good. Uniformity often results in the relative suppression (and perhaps loss) of some good cultural treasures--treasures that don't fit into the arbitrary norms which we set up for the sake of doing things the same.

The Infinite Silence, according to the tower of Babel story, was not in favor of uniformity. And the authors of this Genesis myth felt that the Infinite Silence was especially concerned about the people of Babel's drive to reach into the heavens with their big tower and thus be able to do anything they set their minds to do. So the Infinite Silence threw a monkey wrench, as we sometimes put it, into the social works of Babel society. In a play on words that works also in Hebrew, the Infinite Silence made a “babble” of their communications with each other. They suddenly spoke different languages and could not understand each other, so they gave up their spectacular social project and their hope to make a name for themselves and moved away into smaller groups who could understand each other.

Now, what is this all about? Why can we say that the Infinite Silence is opposed to uniformity? Why can we say that the Infinite Silence is opposed to a society becoming unlimitedly powerful? We can still “hear” this “speech” from the Infinite Silence because this is our actual experience with the Infinite: the Infinite, is always experienced as that which limits each and every finite reality. And one of the limitations we confront is a limitation on our ability to make human beings uniform. Humanity is diverse. Reality is diverse. Reality is made of many elements, many dynamics, things that are separate and different. Therefore, a violation of the Way-Life-Works has been committed when a finite thing, like a human society, attempts to be totally uniform, totally united, and thereby to become a tower of united perspective from which high peak all things can become part of this one thing: our society. Clearly, no finite reality can play that role. The quest for uniformity and the quest for unlimited power are one and the same irresponsible quest.

Only the Wholeness of Reality can manifest unity. In the overall flow of Reality, all things are indeed interconnected. But such unity is not rooted in any finite social worldview or any finite mode of society. This unity is rooted in The Infinite Silence. The Infinite Silence is our unity; any other source of unity is an illusion. When we attempt to unify the manyness of life in terms of some finite worldview or social conditioning, we leave out something. The Infinite Oneness is our unity. From the perspective of each finite formulation of social wisdom, we see only aspects of that Infinite Oneness. Furthermore, we do not have a complete aware-ness of the full diversity of life. The Full Oneness and the Full Diversity are both an Infinite Mystery that is beyond our grasp.

There cannot ever be one culture or one religion that knows all that can be known about our relationship with the Infinite. Religion is a finite thing, and, therefore, every religion is one among many religions. Similarly, every culture is one among many cultures. There is not, and there cannot be, one culture which is the final expression of human culture. Each human culture is an exploration into giving form to human living, but since human living is a voyage into the Infinite mysteriousness of Reality, no human culture ever completes the journey, ever formulates Reality in a final sense. Each culture, however full of truth it may be, is not the whole truth.

If these statements seem simply obvious, we need to notice that in our practical living we do not always live in obedience to this obviousness. When the European melting pot of the United States views African-American culture as some aberration or basically defective venture into being human, we are not obeying the obvious-ness to which these statements are pointing. Racism and cultural bigotry is a deep inclination within every social formation of humanity. Perhaps all groups have found it hard at times to believe that extremely different societies are fully human. A western philosopher, like René Descartes, might exclaim “I think, therefore I am,” while a truly self-aware African might find that statement severely limited. Such an African might prefer, “I dance, therefore I am.” “I beat, throb, and move, therefore I am.” “I am a vital energy that includes the vital energy of thinking.” Some African thinkers do indeed view the statement, “humanity is a rational animal,” as a sort of half-truth popular within Western culture.

In Eastern Asia, human beings typically see finding the appropriate communal style as the key to being human. “Rational thinking,” a Taoist thinker might say, “is only one part of finding the Way to be in step with the Eternal Way.”

In the subcontinent of Asia, the ancient seers explored states of consciousness rather than listening for words and messages from the Infinite Silence. Over-rationalistic Westerners have been appalled that many Hindu and Buddhist gurus seem to claim that life is meaningless, that no answer to life’s burning questions need ever be found. The good life, according to many sub-Asian seers, is not about finding answers, but about finding contentment in those states of consciousness which “know” that no final answers have ever or will ever be found.

Yes, humanity speaks different languages, especially at the more profound levels of language usage. The basic images of the major cultural groups of humanity are so different that some have claimed that we are almost like several different species who will never be able to talk to one another at the deepest levels of discourse. But this assessment may not be the full truth. In spite of our very vast differences, human beings are also amazingly alike in the deepest aspects of their existence.

Some years ago, I was teaching an eight-week residential program in Australia, and six fairly traditional Aborigine men and women were attending that program. I have never in my life

experienced a culture so different from my own. These people had created their culture prior to the invention of agriculture or civilization and also prior to the linear rational thinking in which we native English speakers were trained. They often spoke in strange story-like images that did not even seem to make sense until the second or third take. One morning I gave a speech on living in the Land of Mystery, using illustrations out of my own Western culture. After the lecture, one Aborigine man came up to me and made this astonishing comment, "When you speak of the Mystery like that, I can hear you in my own stories." His stories, his culture, his mode of approaching the Infinite Silence was very different from mine, but when we both experienced the Infinite Silence itself, then we could communicate. Our very different finite stories were filled with the same Mysterious Oneness.

The Infinite Silence is opposed to uniformity on the finite plane of operation. But the Infinite Silence is a Oneness that all humanity can experience. And this Infinite Silence is the only true Oneness there is. For finite realities, manyness is the rule. Manyness is the proper state of the cultural and religious life of humanity. Indeed each individual has his or her very own language usage, unique personal story, ways of approaching all finite life and ways of experiencing his or her relationship with the Infinite. Manyness rules in the finite sphere of operation. Nevertheless, when any two of us touch, in our own way, the Infinite Mystery, a certain amazing and paradoxical Oneness can be realized.

The authors of the Babel myth seem to understand what I am saying here, even though they had never met an Australian Aborigine. If they were aware of the civilizations of China and India, their awareness was extremely vague. They may have been somewhat aware of the cultural clash between tribal forms of society and what we have come to call "civilization." Civilizations had been around for a couple of thousand years when the story of Babel was written, but civilization, as a mode of human society, was not as all-consuming as it is today. Tribal people still thrived in some places and the memory of being tribal peoples who had been defeated by civilization was still somewhat present in the remembered legends and myths of civilized populations. Perhaps a distant memory of the conflict between tribal society and civilization is present in the Babel story, for the people of Babel were clearly building a civilization, not a tribal society. And the Babel myth criticizes civilization in a manner that both ancient and contemporary tribal societies might agree with.

Ancient tribal societies tended to be close-knit groups who resisted strangers. At the same time, they were tolerant of diversity, the diversity of other human societies, and the diversity of other animal life forms. Civilizations, however, were structured to be a defeat of diversity in favor of a cultural amalgamation into some functional uniformity of grand scope. Civilizations, once established, tended to defend their principles of uniformity from alterations from within and without. Other civilizations and tribal groups were seen as threats or as less than "human" groupings of people. What we call racism, bigotry, and cultural arrogance is a tone of operation created by civilizations. In the form we so despise today, racism and bigotry were not characteristics that pervaded tribal societies.

We are now living in a strange new time in which we can look beyond the social canopy of our civilizational in-group. We can now see tribal societies as something more positive than obsoletely organized and uncivilized people. And we can consider building a future social organization of humanity in which diversity is again more fully honored. This awareness, this project of social visioning, this plan of social reconstruction can be interpreted to mean "the end of civilization," where "civilization" means that form of social life which has characterized the large scale societies of the last 6000 years.

The tower of Babel story is a critique of civilization, a critique of every civilization's very

worst feature: the ending of diversity in the attempt to build a uniformity towering into the heavens and thereby making a name “for ourselves.” And this name which we civilized people wish to make for ourselves is a holy name, a righteous name, an everlasting name. But an everlasting name can only be realistically applied to the Infinite Silence. So the authors of the Babel myth hear the Infinite Silence saying, “let us go down to this city of Babel and take an audit on their authenticity.” The authors of the tower of Babel myth were clearly opposing our ever-recurring impulse to deny our finitude, to reject our limits.

We might claim, with some justification, that the greatest gift of both agricultural and industrial civilizations has been a continual expanding of the limits for humanity. But hidden within this gift is civilization’s greatest evil: refusing to face limits that are unexpandable. Many of us are now keenly sensitive to the ecological crisis and to the refusals of our corporations and governments to face this crisis frankly. These refusals, these rationalized blindnesses, are part of this old, old story of a civilization assuming that “no limits” is the truth. Almost 3000 years ago, the authors of the Babel myth saw what most CEO’s, politicians, and ordinary citizens today do not see. It is illusory; yes, it is simply evil, not to face our limits. We are actively evil when, instead of dealing humbly with our limits, we seek to make a name for ourselves, creating a uniformity of understanding which is inattentive to the Infinite Silence. What awake person can deny that the Infinite Silence is speaking quite clearly to our times through the ecological crisis? And what do we, who are willing to hear, hear? “Obey the limits or else reap overwhelming disaster.” But the main current of industrial civilization drives on unabated.

This craving to deny all limits, which has recurred in every civilization, was seen by the authors of the Babel myth as a rebellion against the Full Truth. For one key aspect of the Full Truth about life is this: the Infinite Silence supports diversity. In the colorfully crafted Babel myth, the Infinite Silence comes to see the city and is distressed about the degree of uniformity and the push of these uniformity-minded people toward grandiose social power. So against this evil tendency, Yahweh acts sternly. Yahweh creates a babble. The people cease to understand one another any more. They break off the hopeless project of ONE WORLD SOCIETY and move on to more realistic social experiments in a variety of different places.

So the next time you hear some social group wanting to make a name for itself by building a tower of magnificence in relation to which all humans can become alike, take heed. An illusion is going on. A rebellion against THE WAY LIFE IS is taking place. Evil is being promoted.

Shall we indeed insist that every public school child do a common prayer ritual at the beginning of each day because we are supposed to be a “Christian” nation? Shall we indeed insist that English be the only language used in our public schools? Shall we insist that all the cultural groups that occupy every great city act and think alike? Shall we insist that men be just like women, or that women be just like men? Shall we insist (over against the facts) that every family be a father, mother and children? Shall we resist allowing each geographical sector of the planet to develop its own culture, language, morality, economy, or polity? Shall we misconstrue the imperative that we must live together on one planet to mean that we should have the same tall rectangular buildings, the same franchise motels, and the same fast food places in every city on Earth? Most of us, I believe, are not really opposed to having a wide variety of indigenous architecture or eating at unique, family-owned restaurants. So can we not also enjoy and rejoice in the existence of wildly diverse cultural groups that make up our human family? And can we not be content with the fact that none of these cultural groups is Infinite or needs to be, that none of these cultural groups has the whole truth or needs to have?

Can we see that being authentically human means to be content with the ongoing action of the Infinite Silence which is forcing us out of our idealism about building a universal and uniform city where all people are alike, speaking the same language, cruising the same internet, building the same tower into ever greater heights of grandeur? Can we accept that something quite

different is good for each of us and for all of us: namely, a babble of cultures and ways of life, a babble of religious approaches to the Infinite, and a babble of ethical relationships to one another? Yes, and can we imagine viewing each individual human being as a unique being rather than as merely a “member” of some common herd, some common religion, some common culture? Can we imagine humanity being united on a planet-wide basis, but being united, not in uniformity, but in our realistic toleration of diversity and in our humility about our own ways of living?

If we can, perhaps we can also imagine being united in our knowledge that the Infinite Silence has spoken of old and is still speaking loudly today that human life is and ought to be a babble of diversity. If we can accept this direction for social reconstruction as the good direction, we are hearing the validity of the analysis of evil contained in the tower of Babel story.

I suggested that the tower of Babel story might reflect a critique of civilizations from the point of view of tribal society. But I think such a view would not be fully accurate. The tower of Babel story is a critique of civilizations from the point of view of hearing the Infinite Silence speak. The tower of Babel authors were not deeply familiar with tribal societies. They were themselves members of a civilization. They were not recommending that we go back to tribal societies. They were not recommending that we do away with civilizations. They were not even clear that such a choice existed, for they were so immersed in doing civilization that they were not clear that there had ever been a viable alternative to civilization or that there would ever be a viable alternative to civilization. The tower of Babel authors were, nevertheless, viewing the primary corruption of civilization, the denial of our human limitations, the idealism that uniformity could be foisted upon the diversity of life, the idealism that a vast tower of human construction could grow indefinitely. These illusory idealisms are still operative in every existing civilization on the earth today.

Industrial civilization is the most powerful of all forms of civilization. Ironically, the very exercise of industrial civilization’s expanding power is proving that human society is limited, severely limited by the limitations of a finite planet. We are proving that the authors of the Tower of Babel story were correct: the Infinite Silence opposes the unlimited growth and imposition of the human-made social environment.

So the depth of human evil, according to this story, was not that we gave up being tribal societies and began building civilizations. The depth of our evil is that we gave up our obedience to being limited. This perspective, this type of critique, can evaluate both tribal societies and civilizations. This critique will show that every civilization has been evil to a very large extent, and that no tribal society has ever been entirely good. This critique will allow us to create social vision that leaps beyond both the tribal mode and the civilizational mode of doing society. This critique will allow us to envision new modes of social order that are more fully rooted in listening to the Infinite Silence speak and obeying that Voice.

What is Evil?: A Summary

The tower of Babel story is a sort of conclusion to the theology of evil contained in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. So let us pause now and ask, “What is evil, according to these Genesis authors?” Let us meditate on the following overview of these four primal stories:

Adam and Eve	Evil is eating the illusion that we possess or can ever possess an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil. Evil is denying the finite freedom which we are and attempting to relieve our anxieties with an illusory certainty.
Cain and Abel	Evil is the decision to act impulsively on our feelings and beliefs rather than act in the freedom that knows detachment from our most strongly felt frustrations, crestfallennesses, and angers. We need not choose to be envious or to murderously act out our envy. Evil is this yet to be made decision so often lurking at our door.
Noah and the Flood	Evil is the potential for widespread corruption of the human species, and this will lead to catastrophe. Yet, however widespread this corruption becomes, there are still those who walk with the Infinite Silence in daily obedience. And however extensive the catastrophic results of evil may become, there will be a remnant of humanity who will survive the flood of catastrophe and will begin again.
The Tower of Babel	Evil is any social project that refuses to face its limitations, that strives to impose its uniformities on the diversity of life, that strives to build its tower of grandeur in arrogant denial of the actual limits of human life. And however successful such evil may be for a time, in the end, evil is always totally frustrated.

All of these stories reinforce each other in claiming that evil is not the primary principle of the cosmos. The Infinite Silence is good and all that issues forth from this Final Source is good. So human beings in their physical and biological beings and in their Spirit depths are good, not evil. And even if our psychological and sociological patterns are evil, it is not because we are psychological and sociological beings. Rather, it is because we have, by our own choices, created evil psychological and sociological patterns. Such are the clear implications of these ancient stories. Humanity is good. If we are evil, it is because we have ourselves added something or subtracted something from our good humanity. This is a hopeful vision of evil. It is hopeful to understand that all evil is our own fault, because that makes all evil a fragile human-made structure. If we built evil, we can participate in unbuilding evil.

These statements need not be used to deny that we can become deeply enmeshed in evil to such an extent that we are indeed addicted or bound to it, having, for all practical purposes, lost our freedom to do good--lost our freedom to be our authentic selves. We may have to be rescued from such deplorable states by the action of the Infinite Silence. Such rescue, however, need not be viewed as an escape into some other world, but as a restoration to a fresh living of the goodness of our original natural state in which we were constituted in the first place by the same Infinite Silence that now rescues us from the evil which we invented.

I have not, I firmly believe, simply read my theological preferences back into these ancient tales. I have honestly shared, in my own way, the vision of evil which I find in these enduring stories. I have attempted to make this vision plausible by illustrations from my own experience. I am, nevertheless, challenged by the vision of evil these stories bring. This vision comes to me as an audit of my own life. I hear my own evil spoken to when I hear the Infinite Silence say "Where are you?" and "What have you done?" And I hear my own best and finest humanity being called forth by the voice of the Infinite Silence saying "Build an Ark!" or "Leave off building the universal city!"

And finally, I want to assert that these stories are not Jewish stories or Christian stories or Muslim stories. They are simply true stories, true for anyone and every-one. So we need not fear these stories as religious doctrines that might be imposed upon us. Rather they are like aids to our own personal hearing--yes, to our hearing in our own lives today the Infinite Silence SPEAK.

6. The Call to Not Know Where I am Going

The twelfth chapter of the book of Genesis begins a sequence of legends about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives, nephews, uncles, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. If the first eleven chapters of Genesis are about “the theology of evil,” the rest of the book is about “the theology of being called to righteousness.” If the first eleven chapters are about “the goodness of our essential creation and our fall from it,” the rest of the book is about “being selected to experience and lead the restoration of human goodness.”

The first words of the twelfth chapter are about a call from the Infinite Silence to the primal patriarch in the Israeli corporate memory.

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your own country, your kinsmen, and your father’s house and go to a country that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great that it shall be used in blessings.” (Genesis 12:1-2 New English translation)

Let me pause to insert here that Sarai (Mockery), to be renamed Sarah (Princess), is also an important character in this drama. The authors and arrangers of the book of Genesis are, however, living in the time of patriarchy, and everything is seen through that sociological lens. All the biblical writers live in patriarchy like a fish lives in water. They did not know that there had ever been a “before patriarchy” or that there would ever be an “after patriarchy.” For them, the father symbolized and ruled the family in a manner that was as axiomatic to them as breathing. And in the larger sociological picture, the primal patriarch, Abram (High Father) to be renamed Abraham (Father of a Multitude), symbolized the whole religious people. We can now understand patriarchy as a cultural limitation in their perspective. We do not have to accept patriarchy as their religious message. We must simply notice it, and then translate their religious message out of patriarchy even as we would translate their message out of Hebrew into English or some other language. We now live in a different sociological time in which words like father, mother, man, woman, son, and daughter have very different meanings. We don’t need to dismiss the religious message of Genesis merely because we wish to live beyond patriarchy. But we must also be careful to unwrap that religious message from its peripheral patriarchal wrapper, and not transmit patriarchy as part of the message. I have said this briefly, for I want to get on with my exploration of the Abraham stories, but this is a very important matter, and it deserves a longer treatment.³

Abram, before he was renamed Abraham, left Ur of the Chaldees with his father Terah, his nephew Lot, and his wife Sarai. When Terah died in Harran, Abram became the leader of this family group which included a number of other people--herdsmen and their wives and their children. Abram, so the story goes, was at that time 75 years old and his wife was also old and childless. It is in this context that he hears a call from the Infinite Silence.

This call does not tell him anything specific about where he is going or what he will find there. It just says, “Go.” The call also makes a promise, a thoroughly ridiculous promise due to Abram and Sarai’s advanced age. Nevertheless, Abram believes the call and goes, not knowing where he is going.

This simple statement requires us to engage ourselves in a slow interior pause in order to fully appropriate what is going on here. The call of Abraham was a call to not know where he

³ I have given this theme some careful attention in an essay entitled “The Earth Mother and the Biblical God” published in a book of essays called *To Be or Not to Be a Christian* (Realistic Living Press: 1994)

was going. Had he stayed where he was, he would have had some idea about his future, some idea about the journey into which his life was headed. But Abraham was called to not know where he was going.

I want to suggest that this “not knowing” is the very essence of being called to righteousness by the Infinite Silence. Most of the time, most of us would prefer to be called by a “God” who tells us something definite: do this practice; believe this doctrine; go into this vocation; marry this woman or man; become this sort of human being. But Abraham, the primal exemplar for all persons called by the Infinite Silence, did not know where he was going.

Nevertheless, he did go, we are told, believing the promise that he would be blessed and be a blessing to others. In fact, the promise said that he was to be a blessing of such magnitude that his very name would be used in blessing. Abram believed this, and set out in spite of the fact that such a promise had no credible evidence.

Now we know that the authors and arrangers of the book of Genesis were looking backward from the time when Abraham had become a word of blessing for a large body of people. Abraham was, in large measure, merely a piece of fiction created by those people to bring unity and meaning to their lives. But these people identified with Abraham; they read their own experience of what it means to be called by the Infinite Silence into Abraham’s life.

And those of us today who toy with notions of having been so called, need to understand that the nature of being called by the Infinite Silence has not changed. It is not true that the call was any more difficult for Abram than it is for us. No, we too, if we are indeed called by the Infinite Silence, are called to not know where we are going. The fact that Abraham and thousands of men and women since that distant time have heard this call and obeyed it, does not make hearing and obeying such a call one bit easier for us.

In viewing the Abraham story, we are exploring what hearing and obeying the Infinite Silence is like. This is the greatness of the Abraham tales; they explore this profound calling.

The very idea of being blessed by the Infinite Silence and being a blessing to others may seem odd to us. Most of us actually prefer to hide in the herd and be neither especially blessed nor especially beneficial to others. Just say about me that I never cheated anybody. Just say about me that I loved my children. Just say about me that I tried my best to be a good person, to do my job, to make these few things in my small place a little bit better.

The very idea of being called to be the restoration of all humanity--to be a blessing on the macro-scale of the whole of human history--is simply preposterous to each of us when we face the implications of such a notion fully.

But Abram, believing such a promise, set out not knowing where he was going. I am encouraged by the fact that Abram was 75 years old when he started out and that he was indeed 99 before he was given any concrete evidence whatsoever that this promise could come to pass. And when he first heard about Sarah having a child, he laughed. And when she heard about it, she laughed. The Infinite Silence, said, “Why are you laughing, is anything too hard for the Infinite?” So they stopped laughing and had the child.

Now I think we should understand having a child as symbolic for any and all modes of being a blessing to future generations. Perhaps your “child” will be writing a book, or organizing a new social body, or repairing some old social entity. If you are a teacher, perhaps your students are more your children in the Abraham sense than your biological offspring.

Like Abraham, I have indeed wondered if I would ever have offspring who would carry forward the blessing with which I am blessed. Will I ever have even a few students, or write one book, or organize some group, or anything that would realize my hope of being a significant blessing to the times in which I live. My wife and I are now in our sixties, and we have, many times, left behind our whole lives and moved out into futures we could not predict. I understand more fully than I can say, what it means to be called to not know where I am going. So I, for one, am comforted when I hear that Abraham and Sarah did not know either.

If someone were to tell me that this very book or some other “child” of mine had truly formidable promise for the whole history of humanity, I might well laugh. Nevertheless, I keep writing; I keep trying new things; I keep going to new places; I keep embracing new thoughts and new programs of action. Clearly, I don’t know where I am going. It is comforting to me to hear that “not knowing where I am going” is what it means to be called by the Infinite Silence.

How could it be otherwise? I am a finite being dealing with the Infinite. To be called by the Infinite is, for a finite being, wild and unreasonable to the furthest extreme.

Abraham’s preposterous story continues. After he finally has a son who can be the continuity and the meaning for his entire life, the Infinite Silence speaks again. “Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go.....” “..... offer him as a sacrifice...” Again, Abraham does not know exactly where he is going or how this “going” is going to work out. But Abraham, the preposterous exemplar of the preposterous call by the Infinite Silence, takes his son, his only son, and goes. Only when he gets to the top of the proper hill, builds the altar, and raise his knife to kill Isaac, does he hear from the Infinite Silence a change in the ritual.

It may seem to us that with this story the authors and arrangers of Genesis have gone completely off the page into some sort of madness. How can the exemplar of righteousness be asked to sacrifice the only hope he has seen that anything whatever will come of his whole life? But our preposterous hero says to himself, “If the Infinite Silence says do it, then I will do it.”

The trivial interpreters of this classic story have gotten tangled up in questions like: “Is human sacrifice right or wrong?” Or, “Would a good God ever ask anyone to sacrifice his or her own child?” These questions are completely beside the point. These questions are trying to build a rational universe and/or an intelligible ethics. But this story is not about such temporal, ever-evolving, mental furnishings. This story is about being called by the Infinite Silence.

Abraham, remember, is for the most part a literary figure written up by a community of people who are actually exploring what it means for them to be called by the Infinite Silence. So what does the story say about this subject?

What it means to be called by the Infinite Silence is that you have to sacrifice everything, especially everything that seems to make your call by the Infinite Silence a secure possession.

And Abraham really did sacrifice Isaac, because Abraham did not know when he raised the knife if the Infinite Silence was going to give him back Isaac or enable him to birth some other Isaac or what.

But what Abraham did know, as the true exemplar of being called by the Infinite Silence, is this: you have to trust the Infinite Silence. You have to do what the Infinite Silence says to do. And such action does not have to make sense. It does not have to be moral by this or that petty standard. And you do not have to be able to see how everything is going to work out. You do not have to have any assurance of safety, salary, fame, status, love, or anything at all. You simply have to obey!

So, what on Earth does it mean for you or for me to obey the Infinite Silence? If the Infinite Silence would just speak in plain words written down in a channeled book fully authorized by whoever and whatever can authorize such certainty, then all this would be easy. Or so some billion or two of us have thought. As it actually works out, trying to obey the literal verbiage of even the best of our religious books turns out to be confusing, impossible, and, finally, a dead end of despair. Fortunately, the Infinite Silence does not speak in that crass manner. ***The Infinite Silence speaks in Infinite Silence.*** This rational paradox expresses the actuality of being called by the Infinite Silence.

The literary figure, Abraham, and every other literary person or real person who has ever experienced a call from the Infinite Silence has had to embrace, not flee from, the paradox that the Infinite Silence speaks by saying nothing at all.

What does this mean? How is such Silence speech that can be heard and obeyed by me? Consider this: there is much, perhaps most, of the time a chattering in our heads of lies and misinformation. Silence is an enormous improvement over that. The end of all lying, all false chatter, is the advent of the Truth. And this Truth is not the voice of my particular culture, or the voice of my parents, or some voice from my biological genes. This Truth is indeed the Silence that actually reigns when all these other voices shut up.

Often we do not know where the many voices in our heads come from. Perhaps someone from our childhood is saying, "You are no good unless you accomplish something worth while, like a good grade on your next test." "If you can't think of something nice to say, don't say anything at all." "Always smile, it makes life easier." Perhaps someone from your youth is saying, "Don't rock the boat, you have nothing useful to contribute." And perhaps your TV tube has provided you with this lie, "It is good that big corporations rule the world: they know how to do that and you don't." Silence is certainly an improvement over such voices. And the Infinite Silence is something basic in our experience that makes clear to us that all the voices of our culture are limited in their truthfulness.

This Infinite Silence is actual; one might even say that this Silence is overwhelmingly substantial. This Silence is actually LOUD in our Spirit ears and commands us to live life in which this SILENT LOUDNESS is the context for all our choices. I find that it has been helpful for me to note that this encountering of the Infinite Silence is, at the same time, the realization of our essential freedom. Since we simply do not know where we are being called to go, we choose to go in obedience to not knowing where we are going, and this choice, this obedience to the Infinite Silence, is freedom.

Out of this choice flows many blessings. Trusting the Infinite Silence is an extremely stable life. We will never be let down. Hoping in the promises of the Infinite Silence is an extremely up-beat sort of living, for no development can ever challenge our hopefulness. Obeying the Infinite Silence in abiding loyalty is an extremely freeing sort of life, for it kills permanently, as the lords of our lives, all our egoistic patterns. This killing establishes in us our essential freedom and establishes in us our essential compassion for all our companion beings in the cosmic drama. Our whole life does indeed become a blessing. And we are left with only one very exciting and challenging issue: what specifically shall we bless, and what or who will be our "Isaac" through whom our blessing will endure to all generations?

And so we set out, not knowing where we are going, and we try not to laugh when the Infinite Silence promises to give us children.

7. Wrestling with the Mystery

Many of us come to the book of Genesis with our ideas of God already formulated, so we are simply not listening to what this book has to say about God. The authors and arrangers of the book of Genesis are many things--archivists, politicians, novelists, negotiators--but, first and foremost, they are theologians. They are talking to us about God, about the meaning of the term, "God." When their theology is complete they have defined "God" as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Whatever it is that these ancestors worship is what the Genesis theologians mean by the word "God."

We also need to define the word, "worship." In the Genesis vocabulary, "worship" is the fundamental relationship in a person's life. It defines who that person is at the level of that person's basic integrity. Worship can be talked about as an obedience, as a walk, as a way of life. Worship involves the entire person--the body, the mind, the heart, the feelings, the soul, the spirit, the breath, the strength or whatever other aspect of human personhood one might name.

So, as we examine who Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are, we are examining their worship. And as we examine their worship, we are examining what they worship, that is, what they are calling "God."

Furthermore, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are symbols for, "the people of God." In fact, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are legends into which the people of Israel are composing their own experience of being the people of God. So in exploring these three patriarchs, we are defining what the Genesis authors meant by the term "the people of God." And since the people of God are those who worship God, defining "the people of God" defines the "worship of God." And defining "the worship of God" defines what is meant by the term "God."

Most contemporary theologians deal with these themes backwards. Only a theologian who starts with a presupposed idea of God could come up with a cute little poem like this: "How odd of God to choose the Jews." This poem presupposes that we know what "God" means and who "the Jews" are. But let us suppose that we do not know who or what "God" is. And let us also suppose that we also do not know who "the Jews" are. Now we are ready to hear the questions that are being asked by the theologians of the book of Genesis: "Who is the God that Israel worships?" and "Who is Israel?" These two questions are the same question, for "Israel" means "those who worship God."

"Israel," as a Hebrew word, actually means "striver or wrestler with God." And Israel was the new name given to Jacob after he engaged in a strange all night wrestling at the ford of Jabbok. So, in this chapter, I am going to focus on this story about Jacob and about how this story helps us to define who "Israel" is and, therefore, to identify the "God" that the authors of Genesis recommend for our worship.

Before I launch into the story of Jacob, I need to give a bit of background on the strange task that the Genesis authors are doing. They are dealing with a complex maze of traditions borne by a wide variety of sub-groups who are being formed into a singular nation, but more importantly into a singular religious body. Every character, man and woman, in the book of Genesis might be thought of as a group of people, for the ancestor is symbolic of the whole people. The ancestor is a real person in the real past, but the ancestor is also clothed in legend, in fiction, which is dealing with this subject, "Who are we as a people?"

So, when we read about the various characters in the book of Genesis, we are actually reading about groups and how the Genesis authors wish to relate these groups to one another

and to the fundamental question, “Who are we as a people?” Insofar as Isaac, the digger of wells, was a real person in the past of Israel, we don’t know whether he was the biological son of Abraham or not. But in the Genesis epic, Isaac is the child through whom Abraham’s promise is carried forward, not Lot, who is scripted as being Abraham’s nephew, and not Ishmael, who is scripted as being the child of Sarah’s maid, Hagar. And the legends of Isaac, which are rather brief compared to the legends of Abraham and Jacob, are almost repetitious of the legends of Abraham. Isaac and Abraham are, it seems to me, welded into one great-grandfather, grandfather figure. Then Jacob and Esau are scripted as twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. But even though Esau is the first born, Jacob, not Esau, is scripted as being the basic continuation of the Abraham promise. Finally, the twelve sons of Jacob, who is renamed “Israel,” end up having names that correspond to the tribal groups of whom the Davidic kingdom is being composed.

So, this is what I mean when I say that the authors and arrangers of Genesis were many things--archivists, politicians, novelists, negotiators--but, first and foremost, theologians. It is their theological formulations that are their great achievement, and it is this theology to which we are most indebted. So, I will now return to their big questions. What does it mean to be Israel, the people of God? And who or what “God” does Israel worship?

The legends of Jacob are significantly different in style from the legends of Abraham. Abraham is pictured as an almost “too good to be true” paragon of obedient trust. Abraham is the distilled essence of being the people of God. Jacob, however, comes off as a more down-to-Earth character. Jacob has to fight and struggle for every thing he gets in life. Jacob is a schemer and a shyster, an aggressive, ambitious person who gets into and out of one scrape after another. Personally, I find it comforting that the portrait of the people of God in the book of Genesis includes a man like Jacob, for Jacob dramatizes elements of my life that would be missing if we only had Abraham and Isaac as our “people of God” father-image.

Jacob came out the womb, so his legend goes, holding onto the heel of Esau. Later when Esau is starving hungry, Jacob swaps Esau a bowl of soup for his birthright. Still later, Jacob and his mother Rebecca plot to steal the blessing that Isaac, now blind, had prepared for his favorite son, Esau. Esau, when he learns about this, is most upset. He begs his father Isaac to give him a blessing also, but Isaac cannot take back the blessing he gave to Jacob thinking he was Esau (which blessing included Jacob ruling over Esau) and so Isaac must now give Esau a much less glorious blessing. Well, this is the last straw for Esau, and he plans to kill Jacob. But Rebecca arranges for Jacob to go away to his uncle Laban’s people to live there and find a wife.

On the way there, Jacob, traveling alone, has his first numinous breakthrough. In a dream, he sees a ramp (or ladder) with one end on the ground and the other in the heavens. Messengers of God are going up and down this ramp. And the LORD, the god of Abraham and Isaac, somehow encounters him through this busy ramp and repeats to him the promise made to Abraham. In other words, the Infinite Silence now speaks to Jacob as he is leaving home--quite alone, uncertain, and in considerable vulnerability.

“This land on which you lie, to you I will give it and to your seed. And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall burst forth to the west and the east and the north and the south, and all the clans of the earth shall be blessed through you, and through your seed. And, look, I am with you and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken to you.” (Genesis 28:13-15 translation by Robert Alter, *Genesis*, W.W.Norton, New York: 1996)

Now Jacob awakes from sleep and is frightened. He focuses his fear (or Awe) on this particular place, which he renames Bethel; but perhaps it is the extent of this promise and the implied responsibility for it that is the really fearsome thing. Jacob, the old bargainer and

cautious schemer, makes now what seems to me to be a quite conditional vow, “Just for some safety, food and clothing, I will worship you, Yahweh, as my God.”

He proceeds on toward Laban’s country and on the way meets the beautiful Rachel, Laban’s daughter, with whom he falls in love. She takes him to her father’s house, and he arranges with Laban for Rachel to be his wife at the end of seven years of work for Laban. But at the end of the seven years, Laban smuggles his other daughter, Leah, into Jacob’s bridal chamber. After Jacob complains that this was not their deal, Laban explains that in their country the elder daughter must be given first, and offers him Rachel also, but for seven more years of work.

Now, as we know, Jacob was also a rather shrewd operator, and during that second seven years he made himself wealthy with a tricky wage deal and breeding operation concerning Laban’s sheep and goats. At the end of the seven years, Jacob surmised that escaping from Laban and his sons with Laban’s daughters and grandchildren and all this wealth was not going to be easy. So he fled without informing Laban. After three days Laban pursued him and caught up with him in seven days. In this interim, Laban had had a dream warning him not to harm Jacob, so the two old scoundrels parted in peace, but it was a close call.

Next, as Jacob continues his return to the land of his fathers, he has Esau to deal with. He sends greetings ahead to Esau, and his messengers return with the news that Esau is coming to meet him and has 400 men with him. Jacob fears for his life. He sends three groups of people ahead of him separated by a distance between them with gifts of tribute for Esau. And then we read of Jacob’s all night wrestling match.

And he rose on that night and took his two wives and his two slavegirls and his eleven boys and he crossed over the Jabbok ford. And he took them and brought them across the stream, and he brought across all that he had. And Jacob was left alone, and a (figure) wrestled with him until the break of dawn. And (the figure) saw that he had not won out against (Jacob) and he touched his hip-socket and Jacob’s hip socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. And (the figure) said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” And (Jacob) said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And (the figure) said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” And (the figure) said, “Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out.” And Jacob asked and said, “Tell your name, pray.” And he said, “Why should you ask my name?” and there he blessed him. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, “I have seen God face to face and I came out alive.” And the sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping on his hip. (Genesis 32:23-33 translation by Robert Alter)

Obviously, this wrestling match relates to the crisis of meeting Esau. Jacob is alone grappling for his life and safety and for the lives and safety of all those who now comprise his rather large assembly of people. And he is grappling for his own trust in that obscure and unlikely promise of his being a blessing for all time rather than a mere pool of blood tomorrow morning.

He is up all night, and the mysterious night visitor says as the sun is about to rise, “Let me go.” But Jacob hangs on demanding a blessing. “OK, here’s the blessing. What is your name?” When we hear Jacob answer “Jacob,” we need to see Jacob’s whole life story go by in our minds. He was called Jacob at birth, meaning “heel grabber.” Esau later interpreted the name Jacob to mean “crooked.” Indeed the whole life journey of this name “Jacob” might be summed up as “the deceptive schemer.” Perhaps even stronger words echoed around in Jacob’s head: scoundrel, cheater, liar. Perhaps he was hearing Esau’s voice say “hated brother” or even “dead man.”

So here was the blessing. “No longer shall your name be Jacob!” We are going to have a change in identity here. Jacob, as merely Jacob, is going to pass away. Here is the rest of the blessing. “Israel shall be your name.” “Israel” means striver or wrestler with God. So this was

the blessing: “Wrestler with God” shall be your name.

Now the identity of the nameless all-night wrestling partner is out in the open. As Jacob himself says, limping along afterward, “I have met God face to face and am still alive.” Now what had Jacob met? What or Who is this God that Jacob has met?

Actually, Jacob had been wrestling with God ever since he left the womb. Jacob had been grappling with some Mysterious Otherness all along, grappling for a destiny, insisting on a life, working for a blessing. So being Israel, the wrestler, was not exactly something new; it was a new depth of realization about who he actually was. “I am not a cheat and a scoundrel, though I am indeed that as well. I am a wrestler with Final, Final, Final Whatever for a destiny.” The all-night wrestling match made it clear who Jacob really was and with whom Jacob’s life was an ongoing wrestling.

Jacob had now learned that he could not vanquish the Infinite opponent, and he also knew that he did not have to succumb. He held out for the blessing. And the opponent blessed him, blessed him with the truth about who he was. You are not Jacob but Israel; not scheming supplanter, but wrestler with God; not hated brother doomed to die, but active freedom capable of wresting a destiny from the very jaws of doom.

This new name put a limp into the walk of Jacob. The old cockiness was wiped out. The old paranoia was gone too. In the new name of wrestler with God, he arose and went to meet the estranged brother he could no longer avoid. He handled himself very well that day. He did not lose his temper. He did not get restimulated by his guilt or by the extreme danger of the situation. He was kind toward his brother beyond all the bounds of his brother’s expectations. He sincerely asked his brother, and the Mysterious Other with whom he was wrestling, for his life and the lives of those with him.

Now, he did not know whether this request would be granted. But in living this style, he was winning in his wrestling match with the Mystery no matter how all this worked out. He was not succumbing. He was not pretending to be in control over what he did not control. He asked and he received the gift that the Mystery and his brother chose to give.

The story provides us no analysis of the psychology of Esau. Perhaps he saw that Jacob was different. Perhaps he was impressed with all the gifts and all the generosity and all the kind words. Perhaps he was challenged by the daring and freedom and courage manifested by this almost forgotten brother. Perhaps he wondered if such a companion in life would not be a blessing to him.

Whatever it was, Esau chose to spare him. But Jacob did not entirely trust him. When Esau offers to escort him, Jacob declines, saying, “No, no you hasten along. I am going to be moving very, very slowly following my tired stock and my small walking children. Thanks for the offer. We will be fine. I wish you well, as well.” Jacob is still wrestling with the Mysterious Other for his safety. He has not lost his focus. He has not been carried away by the first hint of possible survival. He continues the wrestling. He does not rest. He knows who he is. “Wrestler with God” is my name.

He might also have said, “My God is the Mysterious Other with whom I wrestle. This is the One whom I trust. In my all night wrestling at the Jabbok ford, I learned one thing I want never to forget. I am not a victim of circumstances. ‘Freedom’ is my name. This is the deep meaning of being Israel, of being ‘wrestler with God.’ I am not an all-powerful being, but I have the power to ask the Mysterious Other to bless me and I have the power to receive that blessing,

and I have the power to continue living in the power of that freedom and in the blessing which that freedom is.”

And this is why we remember Jacob. He has indeed blessed us with his blessing. We have his story. We have his knowledge of what it means to be freedom. We have his knowledge of what it means to be a human being. We have his knowledge about the appropriate worship for a human being. We have his knowledge that worshiping the Mysterious Otherness as our God means entering into a wrestling match that is never over. We feel his courage. We feel his victory. We know that we don't have to be superman or superwoman; we can just be the freedom to be the freedom to be the freedom that we actually are.

And if any of our companions ever ask us what it means to worship (or what it means to pray), we can tell them. Praying means to wrestle with the Mystery for a destiny, for a destiny through which we can bless all the clans of the earth.

And if any of our companions ever ask us what we mean by the term “God,” we can tell them. God is the Mysterious Otherness with whom we wrestle, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And if any of our companions ever ask us what we mean by the People of God, we can say, “Israel, also called Jacob, is the people of God.” The people of God are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And who are these ancestors? Wrestlers with the Infinite Silence!

And if any of our companions ask us if our owning of such parents means that we reject the Buddha as part of the people of God, we can say, “Well, did the Buddha wrestle with the Mysterious Otherness? If he did, then he is a member of this people, and he, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a blessing to all the clans of the Earth.”

And if any of our companions ask us if they can be counted among the people of God, we can say, “Well, do you wrestle with the Mysterious Otherness for a destiny through which you can bless all the clans of the Earth?” If you do, then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are your ancestry, their worship is your worship, their God is your God.

Who is this God and what does worshiping this God look like? Above all else, the Jacob stories emphasize that this worship includes freedom: the freedom to wrestle blessings from that Mysterious Infinite Silence who always wins every wrestling match, but who, at the same time, supports our freedom to determine, in considerable measure, what our destiny shall be.

8. Envious Peers are Never in Charge of My Destiny

The last part of the book of Genesis (chapters 37 through 50) is what we might call a short novel about Joseph and his brothers and their aged father, Jacob. We might say that this is an historical novel, for there actually were groups of people who did revere, as their ancestry, patriarchs whose names were the names of these 12 brothers. But the time when these brothers lived, according to the Joseph novelette, was prior to the Exodus from Egypt which means prior to 1300 BCE. The novel itself, in its original form, was written about 950 BCE by a writer, called the Yahwist by most scholars, who, in the reign of King David, was attempting to synthesize the various legends of David's united kingdom. So we need to be clear from the start that any sort of historical documentation for this novel was virtually nil. It was clearly part of the purpose of the author of this novel to tie its original readers into their real history. Still, this novelette is just a story.

And a very good story. This novel is a truly amazing creation. Not only is it a good novel with high drama, gripping story line, and emotional power, it apparently accomplishes its sociological aims and also says something profound about the nature of being the people who are called by the Infinite Silence. This novel, above all else, is about being, in 950 BCE and now, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a Spirit sense. And this Spirit sense is the really important meaning of being "Israel."

I have chosen to title this chapter "Envious Peers are Never in Charge of My Destiny" because this phrase, I believe, summarizes a core theme in the Joseph story. Like any novel, the Joseph novel has many themes, but I am going to focus on this one. I am not going to tell every detail of this quite long story, but I recommend that you read this novel again, or for the first time if you have never done so. Find a fairly contemporary translation of Genesis and simply read this novel as a novel on this very encouraging theme, "Envious Peers are Never in Charge of My Destiny."

Joseph was the eleventh son of 12 brothers. He and his younger brother Benjamin were the sons of Rachel, Jacob's deepest love, the woman for whom he had worked 14 years for his uncle, Laban. Jacob was emotionally attached to these two sons, in a manner that created envy and anger on the part of the elder ten. This envy began to come to a head when Jacob gave to Joseph a long robe with sleeves. But the last straw for these elder brothers was two dreams that Joseph had about ruling over his brothers and even his parents.

They decided to kill him, but Reuben, the eldest, talked the others into not shedding his blood but simply throwing him into a pit. Reuben meant to return and rescue him. Meanwhile, Judah suggested that they sell him into slavery, but before they could return to the pit some merchants had pulled him out and had already sold him to slave traders who took him down to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the pit, Joseph was gone. Assuming him dead, the brothers put blood on his long robe with sleeves and allowed Jacob to believe that he had been killed by wild beasts.

"But what these brothers meant for evil, God meant for good." This interpretive thought is stated later in the story. But this is a theme within the whole story: the Infinite Silence runs history, not envious peers. It is in this light that we need to understand Joseph's amazing adventure in the land of Egypt. As a slave, Joseph was so good at managing things that he was given full authority over his master's property who then, of course, prospered. Also, Joseph was so handsome he became the object of his master's wife's desires, who, when he would not lie with her, accused him of doing so, and Joseph ends up in prison. But again, what this woman

meant for evil, God meant for good. Joseph's amazing talent as an interpreter of dreams brings him to the attention of the Pharaoh. And his wisdom about storing grain for the coming famine resulted in his becoming a top man in the Pharaoh's practical operation.

So now, amazingly, Joseph is in a significant position of rulership when, during the famine, his brothers come down to Egypt for some grain. They do not recognize him, and Joseph does not reveal himself to them until he has tricked them into bringing first Benjamin and then his aged father down to Egypt. Then, in one of the most dramatic scenes in all of literature, Joseph reveals his identity to his family. Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation are enacted all round. And while Joseph lives, the family of "Israel" has a happy period in Egypt. The book of Genesis ends with the story of Jacob's death, the embalment of Jacob's body, and Joseph returning Jacob's body to Canaan for burial.

Now, virtually all of this is fiction. But it was very relevant fiction, for at the time this novel was written, King David was himself the ruler over envious brothers--other tribal groups not his own. David, when he read this story, must have appreciated the way it ended with envious brothers becoming reconciled to Joseph's competent rulership.

The historical memories and the legends of David are similar, in many ways, to this legend about Joseph. Both Joseph and David are pictured as extremely gifted persons who have the uncanny good fortune of coming from sheer nobodyhood into great renown, high office, and the competent use of power.

The stories of both Joseph and David illustrate the notion that great success comes to a human life as a surprising and quite unlikely gift bestowed by that Infinite Silence who rules the course of events. This story challenges us to notice that success of great or small magnitude is never merely the result of hard work on the part of the successful person. Yet, of course, success does enter the historical drama partly because the successful person is a person of equanimity, confidence, and freedom, willing to risk bold choice after bold choice directly into the face of uncertain destiny. The Joseph story seems to indicate that the Infinite Silence smiles on such a person, or to use a very different metaphor, rolls loaded dice in his or her favor.

Is this really true? Can we trust the Infinite Silence, or is life merely a matter of shrewdly avoiding evil persons and making something of ourselves with no help whatsoever from the enigmatic, mysterious Infinite Silence?

In the first place, we can quite clearly claim this: while nothing whatsoever is absolutely assured in real-time history, possibilities do yawn before us to a completely astonishing extent. Someone of Joseph's boldness, imagination, and enduring confidence will realize possibilities that others simply overlook or even flee from in terror. We can certainly learn to maximize our success, from imitating Joseph's style of equanimity, positiveness, lack of paranoia, confidence, trust in the goodness of the Infinite Silence, trust in the essential goodness of his own life, acceptance of the given situation, honoring whatever people show up in each life situation in whatever roles they play in relation to us. This style of living does maximize our results in relation to the possibilities that confront us.

It is also true that standing out from the common herd, as Joseph did, can become an occasion for envy. Some have argued that Jacob made a horrible decision in giving Joseph that long-sleeved robe. As our modern magazines advise us, parents should treat their children equally and thus avoid envy and conflict between them. But let us assume that Joseph would have stood out no matter what Jacob or Rachel had or had not done. Let us assume that Jacob's gift was a sort of acknowledgement that Joseph did stand out. Let us suppose that the gift was even helpful to Joseph in appropriating that he did stand out and that standing out was OK. And

let us praise Joseph for wearing the robe rather than avoiding conflict by saying “Oh no, I just want to be one of the boys.”

Further, let us not blame the envy of those older brothers on their parents. Let us suppose that human beings create their own envy and that parents have nothing whatsoever to do with it. After all, Reuben, the eldest, who had the most to lose by Joseph’s becoming a ruler, was not gathered up in the raging envy of the other nine. What is envy, anyhow, and how does it operate?

Envy is an active way of being passive with my life. When I envy, I am attacking some other person for doing well with their potentialities rather than accepting that person as a challenge to do well with my own potentialities. I am rebelling against having the life I have with its potentialities and limitations and assuming that if I had the life of the envied person, I would be doing better. This is a lie, of course. The reason I am not doing better is my own passivity. I may also have a foolish image of what “doing better” would mean. The “better” I need to do may be very different from the “better” I think I see in someone else’s life. So envy is actually my own creation of a frustration with my own life, my own limits, my own possibilities, and then taking out that frustration on someone who has nothing whatsoever to do with my self-created problem.

The envious person might argue that the problem beneath the problem is that life is not fair. It is not fair that someone else, rather than me, got this gift, this talent, this opportunity, this bit of luck, this attention from another person. And this is true: life is not “fair” by any of the standards of fairness by which we might wish to judge life. Strict equality between human beings, or even between corn stalks, simply does not exist. Do we really want an Albert Einstein to pretend to be dumb in mathematics in order to be equal with the rest of us? Of course not. No matter who we are, we can find others who are more talented and others who are less talented. No matter who we are, we can find others who are given greater opportunities than we and others who are given lesser opportunities. But the fact that my life has been given less talent and fewer opportunities than someone else’s life is not an excuse for my envy. Neither the envied person nor the Infinite Silence is responsible for my envy: I am.

And why am I envious? I am not content with my own life and with assuming responsibility for doing with my life what can be done with it. I want out of the specific crunch of reality which is my own life and into someone’s else crunch whose limitations and challenges seem so much better to me than my own. The desire to become another self is the most ridiculous of all desires, for this desire is actually my refusal to be a self at all; it is a flight from actively living and being the self I am.

Let us also look at envy from the side of the person being envied. Joseph is a good model for us, because he simply does not care whether his brothers envy him or not. Perhaps he is too young and inexperienced to understand envy very well. Perhaps he does not realize the danger of being an object of envy. Nevertheless, Joseph simply wore the robe that life gave him, and did not seem to care what others thought about that. He told his strange dreams of greatness without bothering himself to worry about how those dreams were going to be received by others. I think that the author of this novel is giving us Joseph as a model for our own behavior. Joseph, in this novel, is not being condemned for inciting envy in his brothers. Joseph is a symbol for the person or the people who have been chosen for greatness by the Infinite Silence.

So let us assume that you or I have, in some way or another, been chosen for greatness by the Infinite Silence. Are we to sacrifice this calling by worrying about the envy we might incite in others? Are we to be careful about putting our life out there for fear that someone else will get

mad at us and throw us into a pit? No, a thousand times no. Go for broke, pits and all.

And if you or I end up in a pit, the Joseph model tells us to remain calm. All things work together for good for those who trust the Infinite Silence. Perhaps some slave trader will come by and find some use for your or my “paltry” existence. Then in my new pit of slavery, the Joseph model tells me to keep on trusting and living strong. My destiny is not in the hands of envious, greedy, or foolish people. A much larger context of power than mere humans is the true bestower of my destiny.

Oops, after a period of success, I am thrown into prison for something I did not do. Now what? Give up? Envy my brothers back in Canaan? Sock the person next to me? No, no, no, keep on living. That is the Joseph model. Someone has a puzzlement with their dreams. Give them your best.

Oh my goodness sakes alive, now I am out of prison and asked to perform wonders for the whole economic wellbeing of a vast civilization. What now? Panic? Excuse myself that I am only a simple uneducated peasant from the outback of Canaan? No, no, no, not Joseph. Keep on living. Give them your best shot. This is the model which the author of the novel is telling us is the way one lives when one is accepting the call of the Infinite Silence.

And what do I do when my old envious brothers come down to Egypt for something to eat? Kill the evil bastards? No, no, no, not Joseph. Pretend you are not what you have become? Put yourself down to their level of expectations for you? Don't risk offending them again? No, no, no, not Joseph.

And let us also note the poise with which Joseph kept his secret as he tricked and manipulated these brothers into bringing his younger brother and father down to Egypt. Then when everyone was there, we see Joseph's intentionality and sense of timing with which he honored these still beloved people with the news that he was none other than the brother they had mistreated and grieved as dead. The author of this novel knew how to touch the heartstrings of our authenticity with this picture of Joseph, the exemplar of victorious living.

And the author of this novel, also had another point to make: “Envious Peers are Never in Charge of My Destiny.” Joseph trusts the Infinite Silence. Envious people may intend to do me evil, but my destiny is not in their hands. Joseph, as he confronts his brothers can say, “You indeed meant to do me evil, but the Infinite Silence placed your deed in a larger context and used it for my good and now for your good.”

On this point we may feel, and rightly so, that the Joseph story is a bit outlandish. We, as we experience the ongoing crunch of our own lives, may find ourselves asking, “Is the Infinite Silence really and truly trustworthy?” After all, good people like Jesus, Joan of Arc, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and innumerable others have met violent deaths at the hands of evil persons. Clearly, every life story does not work out like Joseph's exaggerated saga. So let us look deeper at this notion that “Envious Peers are Never in Charge of My Destiny.”

Jesus, for example, taught that we are being blessed when, because of our righteousness in relation to the Infinite Silence, evil persons persecute and even kill us. Such a teaching affirms to the uttermost the life style of trusting the Infinite Silence. Such a teaching suggests that there are other rewards for living this trusting life style than mere survival and success within the criteria of our present societies. We can be successful in the profound Spirit-dimensions of living and still meet with continual failures in the social fabrics of our times. But these very social failures can be seen as part of our Spirit success. In the long-range scope of things, such immediate social

failures may even be profound inspiration for generations of future persons.

Clearly, evil people were not in charge of Jesus' destiny, nor of Joan of Arc's destiny, nor Gandhi's, nor Martin Luther King Jr.'s, nor all other killed and/or persecuted figures in our memory of persons who blessed us all.

So, whether your trusting of the Infinite Silence leads to an outcome like Joseph's prosperity and power or to an outcome of persecution and social failure, it is still true for each of us who trust the Infinite Silence that "Envious peers are not in charge of your or my destiny." Other people, however good or evil they may temporarily be, are only in charge of our destiny when we allow them to be in charge. When we embrace our essential freedom and live that freedom fully, then we can say, about whatever "temporarily evil" persons do to us, "They meant it for evil, but the Infinite Silence meant it for good." And this means picking up the challenge in the resulting situation, and living that situation to the fullest.

It is on such a note that the book of Genesis ends. And in the book of Exodus which follows, this theme is reenacted. Evil men who do not know Joseph take over in Egypt, and then these extensively down trodden Hebrew slaves, led by an unlikely Moses who could not even speak plainly, boldly escape their slavery and begin a new social experiment in the wilderness--a social experiment in which obedience to the INFINITE SILENCE, who, nevertheless, SPEAKS, is the constituting principle of a new law of practical operation.

Speaking Back to the Infinite Silence

Rediscovering the Psalms as Oral Poetry

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Introduction:

Dialogues with and about the Infinite Silence

The Psalms are poetry. They were written to be read aloud. They were written to be read aloud in such a way that we can hear ourselves speaking to the Infinite Silence as well as hear ourselves talking with one another about this enigmatic Silence that we all confront. The poetry of the Psalms also helps us hear the Infinite Silence speaking to us. And finally, the poetry of the Psalms helps us hear ourselves speaking to our own selves about our inescapable relationship with the Infinite Silence.

I am using the term “Infinite Silence” because I want to provoke us to listen to the Psalms in a fresh way. I want to suggest that we try listening to the Psalms in a manner that assumes that we do not know what the writers of the Psalms have in mind when they use the familiar words “God” or “Yahweh.” (Our English Bibles usually translate “Yahweh” as “The LORD.”) We have been trained to think that what we, schooled in our contemporary theologies, mean by the word “God” is what the Psalm writers meant by the word “God.” So we have stopped listening to the Psalms as a way of learning what the word “God” pointed to in the actual experience of the Psalmists.⁴ Thus we do not allow the Psalm writers to teach us anything about using the term “God.” Because we think we already know what “God” means, we are no longer open to learn from the Psalmists what a personal relationship with the God of the Psalmists might mean for us.

I have seen surveys which report that over ninety percent of the U.S. population believes in God. Yet all my experiences with this population convinces me that the vast, vast majority of this ninety percent are clearly out of touch with the actuality which the Psalmists are pointing to with the word “God.” And most of that other ten percent of the U.S. population--those who, in their own minds, do not believe in God--are also out of touch with the actuality which the Psalmists are pointing to with the word “God.”

In our culture the entire issue of being a theist or an atheist is confused by the custom of viewing “God” as an idea, a metaphysical concept that either makes sense of things or is useless for making sense of things. In this context, being an atheist means that we do not find this concept useful for making sense of things. And being a theist means that we do find this concept useful for making sense of things.

Let us suppose we were able to ask the Psalm writers why the idea of God was useful to them for making sense of things. They would be unable to answer that question, for they were not using the word “God” in an attempt to make sense of things. In fact, they used the word “God” to point to an actuality that sometimes supports but more often tears up the sense that human beings try to make of things. Any competent research scientist knows what it means to

⁴ I will use the term “Psalmist” or “Psalmists” to indicate the writers of the Psalms. Conservative tradition credited David with the authorship of the Psalms, but clearly the Psalms were written over a long period of many centuries. Perhaps David did write some of the Psalms. It is at least likely that he encouraged the collection of the first Psalter. David, I believe, was a very talented person--militarily, politically, artistically, and religiously. He deserves his legends. But he did not write all the Psalms, or even most of them. To me, it does not matter who wrote the Psalms. It is clear to me that many intensely aware and inspired people wrote them, and that a passionate religious community selected which Psalms to preserve. The Psalms are part of our Bible because many generations of Hebraic culture found them powerful poetry which addressed and enriched their lives. I view the Psalms as central to the entire Bible, including the Christian New Testament. I give them this centrality not because I believe that the Psalms were dictated by God to David, but because the Psalms clarify in terms of personal experience what actuality we might mean by the term “God.” In this manner, the Psalms illuminate the meaning of the entire Biblical heritage.

have his or her sense of things torn up by actuality. This experience of having your sense of things torn up by actuality is one of the experiences to which the Psalmists are pointing with the term “God.”

Whether, in your own mind, you consider yourself an atheist or a theist, you can still consider this question: “What actuality were the Psalmists pointing to with the term ‘God?’” In my rephrasing of the Psalms, I am going to use the substitute term “the Infinite Silence.” This substitution will not help, of course, unless I also tell you what I am pointing to with “the Infinite Silence.” By “the Infinite Silence” I mean that enduring, silent but ever-engaging actuality which, when encountered, can provoke us to cry aloud “YAAAHH.” “Yah” is short for “Yahweh.” “Yah” is a wonderful syllable: it sounds like something I might cry out when I encounter the Infinite Silence. Let me illustrate what I mean by telling this series of stories:

Story 1. A young woman was driving a car late at night down an unfamiliar road. Suddenly she crashed through a barricade. She put on her brakes and came to a bumpy stop. She got out and went forward to look at the road ahead. She saw that the front third of her car was hanging over a big rock. She climbed up on the rock and looked down into a precipice that dropped off for thousands of feet. “YAAAHH!” she yelled.

Story 2. A medic in the Army, an ambulance driver, was driving an officer’s wife to a military hospital in the middle of the night. She was large with child, and felt the baby might be born soon. On the way she yelled out that the birth was about to happen. The medic stopped the ambulance and assisted the woman with something he had never seen before. With one loud voice it seemed, woman, baby, and medic let fly with the same basic phrase, “YAAAHH.”

Story 3. A high school boy fell in love for the first time. He fell in love with a woman who was two years ahead of him in school, but the first person in his life he wanted to be with at any and all times. In an eerie happy state he was walking alone through a pasture of flowers when from his mouth came this loud sound, “YAAAHH!” A year later, the young woman went off to college. They wrote. But later in the year, he learned that she would be marrying this other man she had met. “YAAAHH!” sounded again in his belly of disappointment.

Now, what were the people in these stories encountering? They were encountering the mysterious gift of life and the equally mysterious limitations of life. The woman who looked over the cliff, saw her own death, saw the vulnerability of her life, and so realized afresh the gift of her life. At that moment in which she looked into the chasm, she saw what I mean by “the Infinite Silence.” The Infinite Silence said nothing, but the woman said “YAAAHH!” Now the word “YAH” is very similar to the word “AWE.” And this fortunate similarity provides us with an easy way to remember something very profound. AWE is a word that points to the subjective state of being which we experience when outwardly we confront YAH, that mysterious OTHER-THAN-I-NESS that AWES us. We can define AWE as the dread and the fascination and the courage to live the intensities of this dread and fascination which we experience when we are being encountered by YAH. This YAH is what I mean by “the Infinite Silence.”

If we now bring the word “God” back into our thinking, it is helpful to remember that the word “God” indicates a relationship of worship. Just as the word “Sweetheart” indicates a relationship to some special person, so the word “God” indicates a relationship to some special ongoing POWER or REALITY. The prophet Elijah chose his name because that name said clearly who he was. The first two syllables, “Eli” mean “my God,” and the last syllable, “jah” is short for YAHWEH. So Elijah’s name means “my God is YAHWEH.”

So what would it mean for our woman looking over the cliff to say “My God is this Infinite Silence which I confront in the midst of this profound fright I have just experienced looking over this cliff.”? What would it mean for the young medic delivering a baby to say, “My God is this

Infinite Silence that brings this new life into being in this attention-getting manner.”? What would it mean for the young man in love to say, “My God is this Infinite Silence I confront in both the field of flowers that helped me celebrate my being in love and in the disappointing letter that told me that this particular love-relationship had ended.”? What would it mean for you or for me to say in the specific circumstances of our living, “The Infinite Silence that gives and that takes away is my God.”?

AWE is what we feel or what we can feel (and be) when the mystery and finality of death finally hits us. AWE is what we feel or what we can feel (and be) when the mystery of birth finally startles us. AWE is what we feel or what we can feel (and be) when the actuality of being sustained and being limited dawns upon us. YAH, the Infinite Silence, is the Source of all our experiences of AWE. If, like Elijah, we call YAH “my God,” we transform all experiences of AWE into experiences of worship. We transform our raw relationship to the mysterious OTHERNESS into a relationship of worship. To worship YAH means to make my relationship with YAH the central loyalty of my existence. To worship YAH means to make my relationship with YAH the master context of meaning within which all other meanings are created. To worship YAH means to make my relationship with YAH the trusted foundation upon which every action of my life is built. To name YAH as my God also defines what it means to fall away from my true being, my YAH-worshiping being, into disloyalty, illusion, and a lack of trust in YAH.

These reflections on AWE, YAH, and the worship of YAH are huge hints toward understanding the poetry of the Psalms. There is, in fact, no hope of our ever understanding the Psalms as long as we are trapped in the popular abstract beliefs about a supernatural realm or a Supernatural Being who lives in some supernatural “place.” To understand the Psalms, we must allow the Psalmists to use terms like “heaven” poetically or metaphorically. We need to give the Psalm writers credit: they were using whatever language they had to express their own experience, ***not to undergird our recently invented theological conceptualities.***

Each Psalm expresses in poetic power some aspect of that Psalmist’s relationship with YAH. There are 150 Psalms and each one expresses a different aspect of human relationship with YAH. Each Psalm expresses a different experience of AWE in our subjective being. There are certainly more than a 150 states of AWE: there are perhaps a 150 million states of AWE. Indeed, the states of AWE are an infinite set, as the mathematicians might put it. But these 150 poems in the book of Psalms will get us started in our awareness of the vast scope of AWE and therefore get us started exploring the vast scope of our relationship with YAH. These poems might even get us started on a journey of worshipping YAH as our God.

When I first considered writing a book on the Psalms, I pictured a master work in which I was dealing with all 150 Psalms. But I now believe that such a large project is not needed to communicate my contribution to the interpretation of the Psalms. So I have selected a few Psalms with which to illustrate a methodology for dealing with all the Psalms. It is this methodology that I most want to share. A dialogue with all the Psalms is an exploration I intend to continue, and an exploration which I invite you to share. For it will surely take many minds many decades to complete the reinterpretation of the Psalms which I see needs to be done.

The methodology I want to share might be summarized as translating a Psalm from its obsolete metaphorical language patterns into metaphorical language patterns that provide powerful poetry for our own times. I want to do this without destroying the essence of the original Psalm. The essence of a Psalm, I will maintain, is the experience of AWE and YAH that the Psalmist was experiencing and expressing.

Translating the Psalms from Patriarchal Metaphors

One of the obsolete metaphorical language patterns used by the Psalmists has to do with male terms for God and humanity, as well as the assumption of male rulership in family and society. This custom of patriarchy is present in all the Psalms. This was the language of their day: they really had no alternative. We can say that they were unconsciously guilty of patriarchy, but their guilt and its violence to women and men we can learn to forgive, even excuse. What we cannot excuse is modern interpreters of the Psalms who choose to use the Psalms as a support for their contemporary choice of male rulership. Today, we do have a choice. We do have an alternative. And I am convinced that the deep essence of the Psalms, and of the entire Bible for that matter, supports the choice of bringing balance to the power and status of the sexes. With regard to male names for God, most of us are surely now able to understand that the Infinite Silence is neither male nor female. The Infinite is clearly beyond such finite distinctions. The ancient use of male symbols for God was never the same thing as our contemporary literalism on that subject. In ancient times, the male-ruled social system was simply being used as a source of metaphorical language for discussing the operations of the Infinite.

Translating the Psalms from Transcendence Metaphors

The Psalm writers' use of metaphorical language about heaven, angels and other images of the "above" is also obsolete. We might call this language the language of transcendence. The Infinite is pictured as on top of the natural realm. Here, the hierarchical structure of ancient society is being used as metaphorical material for discussing the operations of the Infinite. Today, hierarchical and transcendent language is no longer an appropriate metaphorical language for communicating Spirit reality. Not only do we hope to build increasingly democratic social formats, we also live in a universe not a "duo-verse" of heaven and earth. But to make this translation out of transcendence thinking, we must do something more complex than simply abandon the language of transcendence. We must replace it with a new language that gets said what the transcendence language was being used to say. I will be illustrating this as I deal with specific Psalms.

For now, let me simply say that the alternative metaphor "shines through" is a better metaphor for people today than the metaphor "abides above." The Infinite shines through the finite. The Infinite mystery shines through our finite patterns of knowing. The Infinite powerfulness shines through by empowering and disempowering each finite power. The Infinite presence shines through by taking place in the midst of the happening of each finite event. Such metaphorical language (which I call the language of transparency) allows us to share our experiences of AWE in a manner that is congruent with the common sense of our contemporary natural and sociological wisdoms. As we learn to express our AWE more clearly, we can make fresh contact with the Psalm writers, who, while they expressed themselves differently than we do, were talking about experiences that we can also experience.

I will be using as my basic text the New English translation of the Psalms. I will, however, be altering the words of that text whenever I sense that those translators' choice of terms is not expressing vividly to modern people the emotional and spiritual intent of the Psalmist. In other words, my aim is not to do accurate Hebrew scholarship, although I do honor and affirm such work. My aim is to suggest an expanded translation process, one that includes translation from the now obsolete metaphors of ancient times into metaphors that connect directly with our lives today. This is, of course, a process about which I might make mistakes, so I do not offer these rephrasings of the Psalms as final liturgical constructs for the next millennium, but as experiments in metaphorical translation that are, I believe, in the right direction.

Perhaps I can illustrate this method of metaphorical translation with the following chart using the shortest of the Psalms, Psalm 117. In the first column is Psalm 117 as it is translated in the New English Bible. In the second column is my effort to rephrase this Psalm in metaphors which are congruent with our contemporary lives. In my rewording of this Psalm, my most important change from the New English translation is using in place of “the LORD” the phrase, “the Infinite Silence.” Beneath is a slight caricature of a popular manner in which this Psalm is being interpreted.

The New English Bible

Praise the LORD, all nations,
extol him, all you peoples;
for his love protecting us is strong,
the LORD’s constancy is everlasting.
O praise the LORD.

Metaphorical Translation

Celebrate the Infinite Silence, all nations,
extol the Infinite Silence, all you peoples;
for care from the Infinite is strong protection,
and the Infinite never quits.
O celebrate the Infinite Silence.

A Popular Interpretation

Assert the existence of a Supernatural Being, all nations,
extol him (He is, of course, male) all you peoples;
for his capacity to intervene in the natural order and help us cope with things is strong,
and his availability to us is unending.
O assert the existence of a Supernatural Being.

In the following chapters, I have selected Psalms that express very powerfully to me some of my experiences of AWE (and, therefore my experiences of the Infinite Silence). If you, reading these words, are enabled to more fully experience experiences that you are also experiencing, then the communication bridge is being crossed, not only to me but all the way back to those now strange, anonymous figures of our biblical antiquity, the Psalmists.

1. The Tranquility of Total Realism

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 may be the most familiar of all the Psalms. Before sharing my experience of this Psalm, I want to underline again that the Psalms were written as poetry and were meant to be read aloud. In keeping with this quality of the Psalms, I want to invite you to read aloud my rephrasing of the 23rd Psalm, and I want to further invite you to read this Psalm (at least approximately) in the manner which I am going to suggest. These reading suggestions are a crucial part of my communicating the meanings I perceive in the Psalm. I am aware that it may seem odd at first to read the Psalms aloud and to do so in a simple but dramatic way. I believe, however, that you will discover that this way of reading these great poems is much better than having them droned as responsive readings or intoned in pious sweetness.

In order to prepare yourself for the reading, I want you to look down inside your own being. Look down and down and down and notice there a tiny auditorium. As you take your seat in this auditorium you will notice that the auditorium becomes larger--so large in fact that it can seat all the people that have ever lived and all the people that still live today. Even fictitious characters are seated there. The stage of this auditorium is only slightly raised from the floor of the auditorium and the Psalmist is seated on this stage and is illuminated by a spotlight. The whole auditorium is out doors, located on planet Earth, surrounded by moon, sun and other planets, by all the stars in our galaxy, by all the other galaxies extending out in space and back in time to the initiating event of the cosmos. Before that Big Bang of Beginning is a Black Abyss, an Infinite Silence out of which all things have come and into which all things will return.

As you look more closely at the stage of this auditorium, I invite you to imagine that, for the reading of Psalm 23, the Psalmist has gathered a group of friends on stage and is going to address them confidentially. Yet the Psalmist is aware that all the other people in the auditorium are also listening. The Psalmist is likewise aware that the Infinite Silence is listening.

As you look at the face of the Psalmist you recognize that this is someone you know. It is indeed your own face. So you enter into the body of this Psalmist and begin reading aloud the following words. (The dots . . . indicate pauses in the reading.)

The voice tone is matter of fact, not too loud, but quite confident and definite.

The Infinite Silence is like a shepherd to me; . . .
I lack nothing. . . .
The Infinite Silence rests me in green pastures,
and leads me to safe water holes. . . .
The Infinite Silence renews life within me, . . .
and, for the sake of The Infinite Silence's own reputation,
guides me in the right path. . . .

The Psalmist now addresses the Infinite Silence aware that the group of friends on stage and the entire auditorium of people are still listening. The voice tone is louder and expresses a great deal of passionate gratitude.

Even though I walk through a valley dark as death, . . .
I fear no evil; . . . for You are with me. . . .
Your rod and Your staff are my comfort. . . .

You spread a table for me in the sight of my enemies; . . .
You have richly bathed my head with honor, . . .
my cup runs over. . . .

The Psalmist now speaks again to the circle friends on stage. The voice tone is more quiet but still intensely confident.

Goodness and love unfailing, . .
these . . will follow me all the days of my life, . . .
and I shall reside in the home of the Infinite Silence . . .
my whole . . life . . long.

The Psalmist now pauses for a full minute to let the AWE of this poetry sink in.

Well, how did that go? Did you feel the AWE? If you did not, try reading the Psalm one more time. And whether or not you read it aloud the first time, read it aloud this time.

How can we describe this state of AWE, this state of being related to The Infinite Silence? Clearly, we are not talking about a charmed life in which no evil, no enemies, or no dark valleys exist. No, the Psalmist is walking with the Infinite Shepherd through dangerous places: valleys dark as death, evils that might be feared, and enemies who clearly do not feed us, honor us, or give us drink.

Yet in such real life places, the Psalmist claims that nothing is lacking, that rest is being arranged, that safety is being assured, that life is being renewed, that food and honor and drink are being overwhelmingly provided. Furthermore, this Psalm is not referring to one of those high moments in a lifetime of woe. Rather, the Psalmist claims that this is an enduring state of affairs which will be present for the Psalmist's entire lifetime. "My whole life long" says the Psalmist, "I shall reside in the home of the Infinite Silence."

Now it must surely be clear that the Psalmist is not talking about being literally wealthy or actually free from all enemies, trials, and difficulties. This Psalmist is talking about a state of trust in the Infinite Silence, a state of trust that can exist no matter what is transpiring in the actual course of events. This Psalmist is talking about a state of hope in the Infinite Silence, a state of hope that will never disappoint no matter what temporal satisfactions and/or disappointments may be taking place in the present or in the future. What is the difference between hopes that do disappoint and this hope that does not disappoint?

The hope that we will be respected by others in the ways we deserve to be respected is a hope that may disappoint. But the hope of this Psalmist is a hope that will not disappoint.

The hope of finding work we want to do which will earn the money we want to have is a hope that may disappoint. But the hope of this Psalmist is a hope that will not disappoint.

The hope of finding a spouse whom we really love and respect and want to live with until death is a hope that may disappoint. But the hope of this Psalmist is a hope that will not disappoint.

The hope that our children's lives will work out the way we would like and that they will appreciate fully all we have done for them is a hope that may disappoint. But the hope of this Psalmist is a hope that will not disappoint.

The hope that we will find a religious community we really want to belong to is a hope that may disappoint. But the hope of this Psalmist is a hope that will not disappoint.

The hope that we will be healthy and live to a ripe old age is a hope that may disappoint. But the hope of this Psalmist is a hope that will not disappoint.

All our temporal hopes are actually fears that these hopes will not come to pass. Hope and fear are two sides of the same relationship to each passing reality in our lives. Only in our relationship with the Infinite can we have a hope that does not disappoint, a hope that is completely devoid of all fear of disappointment. Only in our relationship with the Infinite can we experience the complete tranquility claimed by the writer of this astonishing Psalm.

I am calling this tranquility “the tranquility of total realism.” Many of our “tranquilities” come about by hiding from reality long enough to forget the tough and fearsome qualities that persist in real life. But the tranquility of total realism requires of us the consent to live life as it actually is. And this total realism includes life as we like it and life that is not as we like it. Total realism includes coming into fuller being and also finding our being wasting away. Total realism includes coming into fuller clarity and also finding our minds entering into dark and unclear places. The tranquility of total realism means having equanimity, rest, freedom, compassion, and a lively inward integrity, no matter what is happening in our temporal lives: clarity or unclarity, more or less, ups or downs, beginnings or endings.

And this Psalmist is not expressing stoic resignation. The source of this Psalmist’s tranquility is not the Psalmist’s own courage. Rather, the Infinite Silence is the source of this tranquility. The Infinite Silence is seen as a trusted dependability that assures us of the possibility of our own courageous living. Our courage is a by-product of our trust of the Infinite Silence.

This manner of approaching our lives may seem incredible at first. Can we really confront the most frightening enemies in our lives and at the same time see these very enemies as part of a table of good food set for us by the Infinite Silence? Can we eat such moments of our lives in the confidence that they are care for us, that the Infinite Silence is providing just the challenges we need and the courage we need to meet those challenges? Can we confront disrespect from others, and yet view this same moment as a moment in which the Infinite Silence is bathing our heads with the oils of honor? Can we enter those dark valleys of seemingly endless grief, and yet see these same periods of time as times of rest in green pastures, being led to safe water holes, having life renewed within us, and being guided in the right path?

Yes, trusting the Infinite Silence may seem preposterous to us when we are on the verge of despairing over our whole lives. But at those moments, we could simply pull out of our memories this remarkable line of poetry and say it confidently to some of our close friends:

**The Infinite Silence is like a shepherd to me;
I lack nothing.**

Now, read aloud, one more time, this all too familiar Psalm.

2. To Flee or Not to Flee the Inescapable

Psalm 139

I want to consider next one of the greatest of all the Psalms, Psalm 139. This is the Psalm in which the Psalmist asks, “How can I escape from YAHWEH?” Clearly YAHWEH, the Infinite Silence, is inescapable, but the Psalmist feels the urge to escape because the Psalmist finds YAH too persistent, too snoopy, too all-present and too all-knowing for comfort. This is the Psalm which Paul Tillich was commenting upon when he penned these provocative words:

For there is no reason to flee a god who is the perfect picture of everything good in man. Why try to escape from such a far-removed ideal? And there is no reason to flee from a god who is simply the universe, or the laws of nature, or the course of history. Why try to escape from a reality of which we are a part? There is no reason to escape from a god who is nothing more than a benevolent father, a father who guarantees our immortality and final happiness. Why try to escape from someone who serves us so well? No, those are not pictures of God, but rather of man, trying to make God in his own image and for his own comfort. They are the products of man’s imagination and wishful thinking, justly denied by every honest atheist. A god whom we can easily bear, a god from whom we do not have to hide, a god whom we do not hate in moments, a god whose destruction we never desire, is not God at all and has no reality.⁵

Psalm 139 is a long Psalm with many changes of mood. The flow of the Psalm is something like this: (1) YAH knows me too well. (2) How can I get away from YAH when there is no away? (3) YAH is wondrous. (4) O YAH, punish those who hate YAH and the servants of YAH. (5) O YAH, keep me in the YAH-way.

These five shifts in mood are, I suggest, different faces of one overall state of AWE. In order to hear this state of AWE clearly, the Psalm needs to be read aloud, and I will again suggest how to read this Psalm aloud. I will use the New English translation as my basic text, but I will alter the language of that text slightly in order to help you focus your mind on experiencing the actuality of YAH rather than flying off into abstract ideas about a literal supreme being in a literal supernatural place. So instead of using the name “Yahweh” in my poetic rephrasing of this Psalm, I am going to use the phrase “the Infinite Silence.” And instead of using the term “God,” I am going to use the phrase “trusted One.” As you read, let yourself experience the inward state of being to which this Psalmist was giving poetic expression. In other words, let yourself be AWED by that inescapable OTHERNESS which creates us, sustains us, limits us, and remains present to us no matter where we go or what we do.

The Psalmist of Psalm 139 is addressing the Infinite Silence. It seems to be a very private talk. Nevertheless, I picture this Psalmist on a large stage with a large audience listening in on this private talk. A single shaft of light shines on the space where the Psalmist sits. The tone of voice at the beginning of the Psalm is subdued, meditative, and shaped by an overtone of dread and embarrassment.

Infinite Silence, . . .

You see through me. . . .

You know everything, . . . when I sit down or rise up; . . .

You watch my thoughts. . . .

You have traced my journeys and my resting places. . . .

You are familiar with all my paths.

There is not a word on my tongue that has missed your observation. . . .

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Shaking the Foundations*; (Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 1948) page 42

You have kept a close watch in front of me, behind me, and over the top of me.

..

Your knowledge of me is beyond my understanding. . .

I cannot comprehend it.

Here there is a shift in tone of voice: it is louder now, more openly full of dread, a tone of satirical humor is added.

Where can I escape from Your examination? . .

Where can I flee from Your sight? . .

If I travel out beyond the last galaxy, . . You are there. . . .

If I bury myself in the grave, . . You are there. . . .

If I flee to the east where morning begins, or go west till the ocean ends,
even there You will find me . .

Your awesome actions will grasp me. . . .

If I say, "Surely darkness will cover me,
black night will hide me." . .

No darkness is dark for You.

The night is as luminous as the day. . .

Dark and light are alike to You.

Now the voice tone shifts to sheer amazement.

It was You who fashioned my inward parts. . .

You stitched me together in my mother's womb. . . .

I marvel at Your presence,
for You fill me with AWE.

You overwhelm me with WONDER,

And each specific entity You bring forth is full of WONDER. . . .

You see me through and through. . .

My private body is no mystery to you.

You saw as I was secretly shaped,
patterned in the depths of earthiness. . .

You saw me unformed in the womb.

You marked down in Your records each of my limbs,
as day by day they were formed.

Not one limb was late in growing! . . .

O trusted One, how deep is Your sense of things!

How inexhaustible the subjects of Your wisdom.

Can I count them? . .

They outnumber the grains of sand . .

To finish the count, my years would have to be as numerous as Yours. . . .

Now the voice tone is loud and angry.

O trusted One, if only You would slay all those who oppose You.
If only those killers of Your truth would but leave me in peace--
those who challenge You with their deliberate falseness,
those who viciously rebel against You. . .
How I hate them, O Infinite Silence, those that hate You.
I am cut to the quick when they oppose You.
I hate them with undying hatred.
I hold them all my enemies.

Now the tone is more quiet, but with the intensity of humble confession and sober trust.

Examine me, O trusted One, . . . know my thoughts. . . .
Test me, . . . see my ignorance. . . .
Watch me, . . . lest I follow any road that departs from You. . .
Guide me, . . . in Your primordial path.

The Psalmist now sits there alone for a full minute while the AWE spreads throughout the auditorium. Then the Psalmist rises and walks off the stage as the spotlight dims and the house lights come up.

After reading this Psalm, do you notice images that are still hanging in your consciousness? List those images and attempt to discern the state of being which lies beneath those images. Allow yourself to remember other times in your life during which you experienced this state of being.

Clearly, we are dealing here with an experience of reality that is accessible to everyone. Who among us is so dishonest that we do not admit our desire to flee from the full intensities of our actual lives, to flee from that Infinite provider of our lives and from the AWE that attends our awareness of the Infinite? This elemental dreadfulness, this wish to flee, is an enduring part of our experience of that OTHERNESS the entire Bible calls "God." One of the proverbs claims that "the dread of God is the beginning of wisdom." Dread is always the beginning of wisdom where a relationship with the Infinite is taking place. This dread is not the opposite of faith or trust or hope or tranquility or joy. This dread is the opposite of spiritual unconsciousness. When we awake to God we are awake to a dreadful presence. If, later on, our faith, trust, hope, tranquility or joy becomes the foreground of our experience, this does not mean that the dread has entirely gone away. The dread of God is the beginning of wisdom and this is a good beginning that persists as a part of all wisdom about being in relationship with the Infinite. This dread is not a stage we get over; it is an ingredient in the whole of our God-experience.

So, as we awake to our experiences of the Infinite Silence we find ourselves already fleeing away from this dreadful reality. The writer of Psalm 139 has not only noticed this fleeing, but also noticed that this fleeing is futile. There is no escape. The Infinite is precisely the Inescapable.

The Psalmist begins his poem expressing the raw discomfort of intimacy with this inescapable Infinite Auditor of every thought and movement. The Psalmist then pokes fun at himself (or perhaps herself) over the futility of fleeing away from the Inescapable.

Then the Psalmist settles into soberly facing the Inescapable as that Infinite Presence which fills all of life with wonder, beginning with the wonder of birth itself. This section ends with standing in wonder over the inexhaustible resourcefulness of the Infinite.

The next section of the Psalm is an angry section that may, at first, seem to be entirely out of place in this Psalm. But the Psalmist is now identifying with the Infinite and with living in intimacy with the Infinite, and, from that perspective, the Psalmist is noticing that the great majority of humanity are in flight from the Infinite, hate the Infinite, and hate all those who count their intimacy with the Infinite valuable. So the Psalmist is assuring the Infinite that the enemies of the Infinite and the enemies of the Psalmist are the same enemies. And so the Psalmist feels anger toward these enemies, anger that hatred of the Infinite dominates the humanity among whom we dwell.

Then in the final verses, the Psalmist notices that he (or she) is also a person who flees from and hates the Infinite. So now a tone of human confession and dedication replace the anger. It is as if the Psalmist is saying, "I do not wish to be an object of my own anger, so I ask You, the Infinite, to do what You do anyhow: keep me in touch with Yourself, with the Infinite, with the path that honors the Infinite, with that way of living that honors the WAY life is."

Asking for the guidance of God, in our popular religiosity, has typically meant asking for instructions from some source of supernatural certainty in order that I will be sure that I am doing the right thing. But when this Psalmist asks to be guided in the primordial path, this request has to do with asking for action on the part of the Infinite to curtail escape from the Infinite. This is a more sober and realistic view on the subject of being guided by God. In this understanding, the guidance of God is simply the Infinite going on being the Infinite and denying any escape from that arrangement.

So, first of all, this wonderful Psalm clarifies what the Bible means by "God" and why we want to escape from this Inescapable Infinity, and then this Psalm clarifies what it means to worship the Infinite, to reverse the direction of our living from fleeing the Infinite to finding in the Infinite Silence the purpose and direction of our whole lives.

3. Experiencing the Wrath of the Infinite

Psalm 90

Psalm 90 contains unmistakably stern language about the relationship of we finite human beings to the Infinite Power which renders us finite. To me, this Psalm is a refreshing rebuttal to all sentimental views of God.

For decades both conservative and liberal interpreters of the Bible have so invested themselves in sentimental ideas about “God’s love” that this Psalm has become an enigma: “How can we speak of God’s wrath and anger when God is love?” Furthermore, this Psalm offers no promise of life after death whereby God’s wrath on our finite flesh can be made up for by God’s love for our immortal souls. For the over-glad religiosity of our day, this Psalm has seemed a disaster that must be explained away or ignored.

But let us listen to the Psalm itself, rather than to our own theological ideas. The Psalmist is not talking about some male supreme being losing his temper. We must keep in mind that we may not know what this Psalmist means by “wrath” nor by “God.” So let us begin our journey of understanding by noting that this very ancient Psalm writer assumes that our finite life is the only life we have. And in this context of understanding, the Psalm writer goes on to express the realization that our finite longing for more life and for comfortable life and for innocent life is being frustrated by the Infinite. To this Psalmist, the experience of being persistently frustrated feels like the Infinite is opposed to us, angry with us, making us objects of wrathful action.

If we ask this Psalmist questions like: “How could a loving God be wrathful?”, we are thinking in a context that is very different from the context of thinking which fills the mind of this Psalmist. The Psalmist assumes that every experience of human life is an experience of God. In other words, the word “God” is not an idea about something going on in “heaven;” the word “God” points to an experience in the here and now of human living. The Psalmist begins with human experience and then does theology. One reason that many of us do not understand this Psalm and other Psalms adequately, is that we typically begin with our already formulated ideas about God, and then move to human experience.

Suppose we attempt to approach this Psalm in the Psalmist’s context rather than in contexts with which we may be more familiar. Let us suppose that we do not have the slightest notion of what, in the mind of this Psalmist, the idea of God might be pointing to. Now let us allow this Psalmist to tell us something about what the word “God” is pointing to in the experience of this Psalmist and in our own experience.

Again, I want to suggest that you read this Psalm aloud, allowing the oral power of the poetry to create within you states of feeling, states of being, states of AWE.

I picture this Psalmist on a brightly lit stage with the audience listening in a darkened auditorium. The Psalmist is sitting, and begins his or her monologue with the Infinite Silence in a mediative, highly reflective, and quite sober mood.

Infinite Silence, . . . You have been like a fortress to us
from generation to generation. . . .

Before the mountains were brought forth, . .
or earth and world were born from the chaos, . .
from age to age everlasting, . . .

You . . are in command.

You turn humans back to the dust; . . .

“Turn back,” You say, “you offspring of humanity;” . .

In Your sight a thousand years are as yesterday; . .

but a night-watch passes, and You have ended the lives of human beings;

they are like a dream at daybreak, . .

they fade like grass which springs up with the morning, . . .

but when evening comes is parched and withered. . . .

Yes, we are brought to an end by Your anger. . .

and silenced by Your wrath. . .

You lay bare our illusory living before Your gaze

and our temporal addictions are exposed in the light of Your presence. . . .

All our days go by under the shadow of Your wrath. . .

Our years die away like a murmur. . .

Seventy years is the span of our life,

eighty if our strength holds; . .

furthermore, the hurrying years are labor and sorrow, . .

so quickly they pass and are forgotten. . . .

Who feels the power of Your anger, . .

who feels Your wrath like those that worship You? . . .

Teach us to count carefully our days . .

that we may have a heart of wisdom.

The stage lights dim to darkness, and when the house lights come on the Psalmist has left the stage.

Parts of this Psalm are exceedingly clear to any awake person. We know that our lives are short, shorter than we might like. We also know that our lives are not filled with only pleasant moments, the sort of moments with which we might like to have our precious days filled. Many of our moments are hard work and/or sorrows of one sort or another. And we may also feel that our years seem to hurry by, pass so quickly, and are indeed forgotten.

This temporal fragility, this fast-moving brevity, is an experience of God, according to this Psalmist. Our temporality seems like the wrath of God to this Psalmist, but by this expression the Palmist is not demeaning God. The Psalmist is simply describing part of his experience of God. More to the point, the Psalmist is telling us what sort of experiences are experiences of God. The Psalmist is telling us what the word “God” means to this Psalmist.

Have we not also experienced our illusions about life laid bare? Were we not at one time asleep to our limitations, perhaps in denial of our approaching death? Have we not experienced being exposed to such truth, awakened to such sobriety? Such experiences the Psalmist is calling “the wrath of God.”

And have we not been lustful--that is, had addictions or attachments to this or that finite

pleasantry? And have we not been embarrassed from time to time when these lustful qualities of our living have been exposed to view? Such experiences the Psalmist is calling “the wrath of God.”

The Psalmist is not saying these experiences are bad experiences. Indeed, the Psalmist does not believe that anything God does is bad. “Bad” is defined by fleeing or hating what God does. “Good” is defined by what God does. So the wrath of God is good. It is amazing to me how matter of fact this Psalmist is about God’s wrath. The Psalmist is not complaining that God is wrathful. The Psalmist is not accusing God of having bad character. The Psalmist is just noting that the everyday ongoing action of the Infinite Silence is like wrath toward any finite being who wishes more and more and more finite being and finite comfort. The always limited quality of human life may be sobering, but it is also the plain and simple truth. Indeed, facing up to this truth is called by this Psalmist “a heart of wisdom.” So the Psalmist advises us to carefully count our days, to notice their limited number, so that we may be wise in our hearts.

With such wisdom in mind we can better understand the opening lines of this Psalm: “You have been our fortress.” The Infinite Silence is pictured as a refuge, a home, a place of dwelling. And this means that the wrathful God can be viewed as our home, as a home we prefer to that false home of having escaped to some illusion that there is no wrath directed against our hope for a more than finite condition. Indeed, the wrathful God is the only God who can be our home from generation to generation. Every other “home” passes away.

The wrathful God is our refuge, our fortress, our protector from all illusion. When we are at home with the wrathful God, we are living in a home that does not pass away. Such clarity is indeed a heart of wisdom.

I am convinced that the earliest version of this Psalm ended with the words, “that we may have a heart of wisdom.” Whatever the scholars say or don’t say, I believe that the last eleven lines of the current Psalm were added at a later date. I believe this because these eleven lines express a different state of being, another state of AWE. After your oral reading of these lines, I will explain what I mean.

How long, O Infinite Silence? . . .
Relent and take pity on those who worship You. . . .
Satisfy us with Your benevolence when morning breaks,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. . .
Repay us days of gladness for our days of suffering,
for the years You have humbled us. . .
Show those who worship You Your deeds . . .
and their children Your majesty . .

May all delightful things be ours, . . O Infinite Silence, . . our trusted One. . .
.
and establish the work of our hands . .
Yes, firmly establish the work of our hands.

These lines--“How long, O Infinite Silence? Relent and take pity on those who worship You.”--do not express the same state of AWE as “Infinite Silence, You have been like a fortress to us from generation to generation.” I believe that this additional ending to the original Psalm

stands by itself as a good Psalm. I do not believe that these two Psalms are contradictory. I just believe that they are different poems. Let us look at this second poem and discern more fully how its state of being is different.

The second poem is a lament and a request. “How long? Take pity. Satisfy us. Make us glad. Repay us. May all delightful things be ours. Establish the work of our hands.” This is a different state of AWE from the more somber broodings about finitude and having a heart of wisdom. Nevertheless, it is true that a wise heart need not simply resign itself to sorrows and sufferings. Finite life also has possibilities. The Infinite Silence provides possibilities as well as frustrations. “So,” says the second poem, “let us have some gladness.” “Let us be open to receive the pleasant things that finite life can provide.” Such a request is not unwise. Such a request does, in a way, complete the original poem. While we must indeed take limitation from the wrathful God, we can also be ready to take new possibilities from the same Infinite Silence that is everlastingly wrathful upon our hope for an unlimited life. These thoughts make me respectful of whoever it was that thought the more ancient Psalm 90 needed a further ending, needed a companion state of AWE to go along with that more somber one.

I want to look more closely at some of the lines of this second poem.

Repay us days of gladness for our days of suffering,
for the years You have humbled us.
Show those who worship You Your deeds
and their children Your majesty.

We can discern in these words a deep social concern for the state of the worshipping people. This sounds like the poetry of an Israelite who lives in Babylon during the Exile, someone whose nation has been conquered, who has suffered many years of exile, and yet who is still able to hope for something better. At such times in life, our biggest temptation is to sink in bitter resignation to the existing state of affairs because we find it easier to do this than to believe in the possibility of change. This poem is countering that sort of despair. This second poem does not deny that the days of suffering and the years of humbling have been actions of the God that Israel worships. But this understanding, wise as it is, does not need to defeat our ability to hope for something better.

May all delightful things be ours, O Infinite Silence, our trusted One.
and establish the work of our hands
Yes, firmly establish the work of our hands.

This emphasis on establishing the work of our hands needs comment. While it is true that the works of humanity are never eternally established, it is also important to value historical success. Even the pyramids of Egypt will not last forever: they are being slowly worn down by the sands of time. All human works are temporary. But we can also be thankful that the Israeli sages saw clearly that their religious community and their religious treasury needed to be successfully preserved in the course of history. They needed to succeed with the work of their hands. And they did. This prayer at the end of Psalm 90 was answered: that is, the Infinite Silence did offer to this group of people the possibility of carrying Psalm 90 and other profound resources on down to us. Indeed, Psalm 90 still has the possibility of lasting longer than the pyramids.

So we might say that those sages who added this second poem to the original Psalm 90 knew

that all of us, in every time, need to add to our wisdom about the shortness and tragedy of personal existence the further wisdom that life continues on this planet beyond our deaths, that historical success is important, and that there is nothing whatsoever wrong with our being glad for as many days of our lives as possible.

The Infinite Silence is indeed a wrathful firmness we can count on to limit all finite realities, but the Infinite Silence is also a resourceful storehouse of possibilities that should never be underestimated.

4. Exalting in the Power of the Infinite

Psalm 29

“Power” has become almost a naughty word in the vocabulary of some religious teachers. Not only are we warned about our real misuses of power, but we are made to feel uncomfortable about having power, especially power over anyone else. We are also made to feel uncomfortable about anyone else having power over us. Such ethical teachers may advise us to embrace our own power and use it constructively, but they go further and advise us not to use our power to restrain or limit any one else. Further such ethical teachers tend to reject all notions of a God who has Infinite power over us.

This attitude toward power is based on a misunderstanding of the essence of power in human existence. Having being is having power. And having being is not simply having power to do something enhancing, it is also having power **over** other beings who have less power. Our cat has power **over** the mice and lizards and moles and birds she can catch. We have power **over** her. The police and the governmental officials have power **over** us. Many different people in many different ways have power **over** us. And adults plainly and simply do have power **over** the children who are entrusted to their care. And, whether we like it or not, we cannot avoid having some measure of power **over** some of the other adults with whom we are related. “**Power over**” is not a correctable condition: this condition is built into our very existence.

We can, of course, use our power responsibly instead of irresponsibly. We can use our power to care for others rather than tyrannize others for the sake of our own arrogant or greedy ends. But the issue of misusing power must be distinguished from the issue of having power. Power itself is good. It is part of our good existence.

Such an attitude toward power is clearly present in the Psalms. Further, the Psalms view as good the fact that we humans are not All-powerful, but confront an Infinite Power who has power **over** us.

Several of the Psalms exult in the Power of the Infinite. These Psalms express an elemental biblical view which might be stated in this manner: a God who does not have the power to deliver us would not be a God worth trusting. The writer of Psalm 29 takes delight in the power of the Infinite Silence. Let us listen.

I see the Psalmist of Psalm 29 standing on the front boards of a stage in an auditorium where all the rulers and great persons of all of human history are seated. Also seated on the back rows are people dressed up as the gods which many people worship. Each civilization has a person costumed to represent it. Each nation. Each modern corporation. Each religion. Each human emotion. Each human desire. All these gods have been gathered to listen to this Psalm. And all those who worship such gods have also been gathered. The Psalmist begins speaking to the gods in the back rows in a very loud and commanding voice.

Bow down to the Infinite Silence, all you gods!
Ascribe to the Infinite Silence glory and might!
Give to the Infinite Silence due respect!
Bow down in submissive attire before the Infinite Silence! . . .

The Awesome Infinite Silence thunders;
the voice of the Infinite Silence echoes over the waters,

the Infinite Silence is more powerful than the mighty waters.
The voice of the Infinite Silence is power.
The voice of the Infinite Silence is majesty.
The voice of the Infinite Silence breaks the cedars,
the Infinite Silence splinters the cedars of Lebanon.
The Infinite Silence makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Infinite Silence makes flames of fire burst forth,
the voice of the Infinite Silence makes the wilderness writhe in travail;
the Infinite Silence makes the wilderness of Kadesh writhe.

After a short pause the Psalmist continues in a more quiet and somewhat amused tone.

The voice of the Infinite Silence makes the hinds calve . . .
and brings kids early to birth. . . .
And in the temple of the Infinite Silence all cry “AWESOME!” . . .
The Infinite Silence is power beyond the most powerful chaos. . .
The Infinite Silence has taken the royal seat of RULER forever. . . .

Now the Psalmist addresses the people sitting in the front rows of the auditorium and speaks to them confidentially these words of comfort:

**The Infinite Silence will give strength to worshipers of the Infinite Silence;
the Infinite Silence will bless those worshipers with peace.**

The Psalmist now steps down from the stage and mingles with people in the front rows.

Clearly, this Psalm writer intends to stun us into an immediate experience of the All powerful and then share with us the possibility of finding strength and peace in the worship of this plainly experienced actuality.

As members of a modern, scientific, high-tech, industrial civilization, we tend to take great delight in our own power and insist on being in charge of everything in our lives. So we may wonder why this Psalmist can be so exuberant about being limited by the All-powerful. Most modern people are more likely to view this Power of the Infinite as a problem to be handled rather than as a glorious actuality to be celebrated.

This Psalmist is recommending that we surrender our confidence in our own powers and bow down in realistic celebration of a Power which has unlimited power over us. When the Psalmist is asking all the finite gods to bow to the Infinite Silence, we are also being asked to bow, to humble ourselves before the actual “Determiner of our Destiny.” This surrender, the Psalmist says, will give us strength. This surrender will give us peace.

Perhaps we can intuit that such humility before the Power of the Infinite would correct a fundamental problem in modern life. Advertisers tell us there are “no limits.” Many, perhaps most, corporations act like there are no limits to their growth or profits or uses of the Earth. Wealthy investors and innovators act like there should be no limits to their wealth or to their privileges to promote whatever technologies they wish. Huge drug cartels and other illegal

groups also oppose all limits to their doing whatever they wish.

I personally am fed up with such illusions, so as I listen to the author of Psalm 29 speaking to us with power about POWER, I find myself rejoicing with this Psalmist. I am glad to hear this Psalmist address my century. I hope the message of this Psalm will wake up those who hold illusory attitudes about the extent of human power and do not see the sheer foolishness of worshiping human power.

Yet I am also well aware that human beings, trained in these illusions of the modern era, are not easy to interest in the subject of humanity's final limitations. We have gloried for centuries in being modern, scientific, technological wizards who push the limits of humanity farther and farther. Fortunately, there are some scientific-minded people who, being supremely loyal to the scientific method, study the raw facts of human limitation. They see that limitations are scientific facts as well as ethical wisdom. Nevertheless, many scientists, ethicists, business tycoons, and most of the advertisement-educated masses want both science and religion to support their notion that there are no limits for humanity. Many religious leaders are also colluding with this popular desire.

Some religious leaders have even invented a God of limited power, a finite and evolving God to go along with our evolving human power. Other more conservative religious thinkers have attempted to resolve this complex of issues in this insidious manner: human life, they say, is limited insofar as we are beings in the natural realm, but in the spirit realm, they say, we are not limited. These thinkers admit that we are limited in our natural lives, but the God they recommend for our worship is not the limiter of humanity, but a "Spiritual Power" who both assists us with our earthly limits and assists us to be unlimited in the world to come. Such clearly unbiblical thinking is using the Greek notion of a built-in immortal soul to support this "no limits" hope. Such thinking is far removed from the view expressed in Psalm 29.

It is true that Christianity, as it moved away from its Hebrew origins and began preaching in a Greco-Roman culture, accommodated to this Greek belief in the immortality of the human soul. But the way these early Christians accommodated provides no support to our modern desire to believe in "no limits" for the human soul. Early Christian theologians did not give up the notion that God is All-powerful over us. Rather they insisted that God was all-powerful on both sides of death. On the other side, God was seen as all-powerful over the destiny of the soul just as God was seen as all-powerful over soul and body on this side of death. Their developed mythologies about heaven or hell for the immortal soul can be viewed as their way of reconciling God's all-powerfulness with Greek immortality.

Now we who are living in the modern scientific era have experienced a deconstruction of Greek metaphysics and with it a deconstruction of our certainty about having an immortal soul. Many, if not most, intensely thoughtful people today have deep doubts about having an immortal soul which literally goes to either heaven or hell. Some of us are toying with Eastern ideas that we have a series of lives, past lives and future lives, in which we have a better chance to manifest our full unlimited potentials.

But the writer of Psalm 29 does not believe in immortality or reincarnation. Those of us who use these means of insisting on there being "no limits" would be counted by this Psalmist among that gallery of humanity who worship false gods. To those gods and their worshipers, this Psalm writer thunders, "Bow down to the all powerful Infinite Silence." This Psalmist can thunder because this ancient sage sides with the Infinite Silence who is the "Real" thunder. The Infinite Silence thunders with volcanoes and earthquakes and gently manifests power in the births of animal life. Yes, the God this Psalmist worships is seen as more powerful than the

mightiest flood, more powerful than total chaos. Chaos is made orderly, and human order is rendered chaotic by the All-powerful Infinite Silence.

And this POWER, claims the Psalmist, gives strength to those who find their root meanings in being limited by this POWER. Yes, these worshipers will be blessed with peace.

Why? Because such worship is not worshiping an illusion. Such worship is simply being human authenticity. Such worship establishes us in the truth of who we actually are. Admitting our complete finitude is peace. Admitting that we are in the power of the All-powerful Infinite Silence is peace. For this is the plain truth. And this truth thunders and echoes: it manifests itself in every aspect of this one and only real world.

“SO BOW DOWN!” commands the author of Psalm 29.

5. The Holiness of Nature

Psalm 8

Both those who use the Bible as an absolute authority and those who extensively reject the Bible tend to misunderstand the relationship to nature which is present in biblical literature. The biblical heritage does not recommend dominion over nature in the modern sense. And the God of the Bible does not transcend nature in the sense that God is experienced apart from our experiences of nature. When we thoroughly stand within the biblical perspective, we are aware that there is no meeting with the “God” of the Bible apart from the meeting that takes place through nature. And “human dominion over nature” is not seen as permission to control or desecrate the planet. Rather, the extent of human dominion over other creatures is noted as an obvious fact. We humans do have unusual powers. The meaning of these unusual powers is not permission to be destructive, but evidence that all-powerful Infinity loves humanity. We are entrusted with great powers to care for ourselves and to defend ourselves. And this entrustment implies responsibility not the license to enact whatever whim whips through our species.

Psalm 8 deals quite directly with the theme of God and nature and the proper human attitude toward nature.

In this Psalm, I see the Psalmist standing in the middle of the stage of a vast auditorium seating all humanity and the Psalmist is looking up into the night sky. The voice tone is fairly loud and expresses sustained amazement.

Oh Infinite Silence, our sovereign,
how glorious is your renown in all the Earth!
Your majesty is praised as high as the sky.
Out of the mouths of babes, of infants at the breast,
You have confounded the mighty,
silencing enmity and vengeance to teach your foes a lesson. . . .

When I look up at Your sky, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars set in their place by You,
what is the human species that You should bestow gifts upon us,
mortal humanity that You should care for us. . . .

Yet you have made the human only a little less than the grandest of all beings,
crowning humanity with glory and honor.
You make humanity master over all Your creatures;
You have put everything under human rule:
all sheep and oxen, all the wild beasts,
the birds in the air and fish in the sea,
and all that moves along the paths of the ocean.

Oh Infinite Silence, our sovereign,
how glorious is Your renown in all the Earth!

After gazing a while longer at the night sky, the Psalmist walks quietly off the stage.

The Awe of this Psalm is directly related to the grandeur of the cosmos and the smallness of humanity in the midst of it. This Awe is also related to the fact that humanity is being cared for within this uncontrollable vastness. We can kill and eat any animal food source we choose. And we have the power to protect ourselves from being eaten. This is our dominion. These are the plain facts, and they mean to this Psalmist that we, humanity, are loved by the “sovereign” of the cosmos.

This Psalm takes its power from an experience most of us have had: gazing into the night sky in wonder. We now know things about the night sky that the Psalmist did not know, but our new knowledge does not lessen the wonder. With our telescopic assisted eyesight, we now see that some of those specks of light are whole galaxies of stars like the galaxy of stars in which our planet, our sun, and our companion planets are swimming. Each of these galaxies, wonder of wonders, is composed of perhaps a 100 billion stars. Each is in the process of changing: it is swirling, burning out old stars, birthing new ones. Each is filled with dark matter that cannot be seen. Each is moving rapidly away from every other galaxy. And this movement is like the movement of dots on an expanding balloon. Wherever you are in the cosmos, this moving away is occurring because the space you are in is expanding. These galaxies are not moving away from each other in a stable space that is not moving. Space itself is a process of movement. Space itself is a finite and bounded reality that is growing larger. This is surely a shocking wonder for all of us who were trained in the image that space is a infinite emptiness in which things move. And space is not empty. At every point space is alive with energies and forces, with comings into being and goings out of being.

And if all these wonders are not enough to overwhelm us, our new knowledge of the night sky tells us that the entire cosmic drama has come from a beginning point some 15 billion years ago. This vast expanding space we are in, if we could run time backward, would shrink to a single point. Every star, every galaxy, every atom, every quark was, in the beginning, located in one vastly potent point of space. And before that point in space, there was no space. And before that point in time, there was no time. There was only the Infinite Silence. Wonder of wonder of wonders.

The Psalmist had less cause than we for being in wonder over the night sky and of feeling small and insignificant. Yet Psalm 8 records the very same Awe that we can feel today with our new knowledge of the night sky. This Psalm writer goes on to wonder over how well humanity has been provided for within this vast cosmos.

This Psalm writer assumes that there are powers greater than humanity, but this does not lessen the glory and honor bestowed upon humanity. In our modern era we have come to see, even more clearly, the unlikelihood of our very existence. If our planet had not been just the right distance from the sun, with just the right physical ingredients and just the right course of events, no life would have flourished. And even within that unlikely drama, the flourishing of human life is an additional wonder. Self-aware life that is capable of being in wonder over the night sky and all its cosmic meanings is itself a wonder. Indeed the Infinite Silence--whose “ways” and “purposes” are beyond the possibility of our finding out--has cared for us. As the Psalmist saw it, we have been given the “dominion” we need to feed and protect our lives. When speaking of humanity’s dominion, the writer of Psalm 8 does not in any way demean those creatures over whom humanity has power. This is part of the wonder being expressed in this Psalm: those glorious creatures over whom humans have dominion are being given to us as our sacred companions and, in some cases, to be our needed physical food.

And if all these creatures are being given to us, it is God who is giving them to us, for the God being worshiped by this Psalmist is that Infinite Silence who creates all things and is sovereign over them all. The term “sovereign” is a metaphor pointing to the obvious truth that we confront a mysterious All-powerfulness that is the empowerment of all beings--their coming into being, their being sustained in being, limited in being, and ended in being. The Psalmist is

not caught up in any modern sentimentality about death being something too evil for God to do. The God who gives and the God who takes away are equally holy experiences of God to the Psalmists. The Infinite Silence gives and the Infinite Silence takes away and the Infinite Silence never goes away in all this giving and taking. The one actuality of existence that is inescapable is the Infinite Silence. The writer of this Psalm remarks that the Infinite Silence has “renown in all the Earth.”

This central biblical perspective can be stated in this simple and clear manner: whatever power it is that gives and takes, this is the power we worship. This power is our God. And if the biblical authors (or we) choose to picture this God as a personal being to whom we can pray and to whose “word” we can listen, this does not mean that God is literally a being alongside all these other beings. This God is not literally a supreme being living in a supreme place. No, no, no, our personal language about God is metaphorical language: it is a way of giving meaning to the choice we have made to make this all-powerful ACTUALITY the object of our worship.

So understood, the biblical perspective being expressed through the image of God’s sovereignty is profoundly affirming of nature. God, so understood, is not a far-away Being who got this universe started and then departed. Nor is God a wholly separate power from the powers of nature--a supernatural power who interferes in the powers of nature at certain special moments. No, the powers of nature and the power of God are mingled together as one interlocking experience of power greater than ourselves. Nature’s power is an expression of God’s power. And God’s power is being experienced as the undergirding empowerment of every experience of power in the natural, temporal, finite course of events.

This perspective is very different from the perspective that sees God as an abstract idea that may or may not make sense of things. For the Psalmists, God was an ACTUALITY of their experience not an idea they found useful to make sense of things. And this ACTUALITY is the direct source of all wonder, of all Awe, of all Spirit consciousness within human beings. This ACTUALITY, obvious in the night sky, has glorious renown in all the Earth.

Surely, if we choose to do so, we can join the writer of Psalm 8 in saying to the Infinite Silence:

When I look up at Your sky, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars set in their place by You,
what is the human species that You should bestow gifts upon us,
mortal humanity that You should care for us.

Oh Infinite Silence, our sovereign,
how glorious is Your renown in all the Earth!

Perhaps I should simply end this chapter at this point. I have already said everything I want to say. I feel I have illuminated about as well as I can the awe that was expressed in Psalm 8. But I want to push on a bit in a somewhat more academic manner because I believe that the term “nature” points to one of the most important philosophical issues in our contemporary culture.

“Nature” has several different meanings: It can mean that which surrounds human society. It can mean the human body as opposed to the human mind or the human spirit. It can mean the “ordinary” part of our experience as opposed to the “supernatural” part of our experience. (In this view, miracles or occult happenings are not natural.)

On the other hand, nature can mean all actuality including human nature. Nature can include the human mind (indeed everything human) as part of nature. In this view, there are not two things--matter and mind: there is just one: there are not two things--body and spirit: there is just one. And in this view there are not two realms--the natural and the supernatural: there is just one. All nature is a miracle and every miracle is a natural occurrence--which is to say that there are no miracles, there are just unusual occurrences we do not understand.

This second view of nature is closer to the view present in the Psalms than the first. Clearly, the writer of Psalm 8 does not view the experience of nature as something separate from the experience of God. God is not supernatural in some literal sense. "God" means the Infinite aspect of our experience of actuality, and "nature" means the finite aspects of our experience of actuality. And our experience of God is happening in and through our experiences of nature.

Let me explore more carefully this term "actuality." Human ideas, of course, have a certain actuality. Human beings create and use ideas and thus ideas are real or actual. But ideas are not actual in the sense of being infused within us from some universal realm of truth. Ideas are humanly constructed entities that point to actualities that are experienced bodily, sensually, emotionally, whole-personally by human beings. So there is a great difference between viewing God as an idea and viewing God as an actuality to which the idea of "God" points.

For thousands of years, Jews, Christians, Moslems, and others have mingled the idea of God with the idea of a two-tiered structure of meanings: the natural and the supernatural. We sometimes call this the earthly realm and the heavenly realm. We may picture this heavenly realm as above the earth. But then again we may picture this super realm as a depth beneath the surface of earth or as a width that is wider than the entire cosmos. Or perhaps we might simply picture the supernatural as the beyond--beyond every height, every depth, every width.

In whatever manner we picture the supernatural in our minds, we need to be aware that there is a difference between this picturing of the supernatural and our experiencing of an actuality toward which this picturing might be pointing.

We are living in a time in which we tend to understand all mental picturing literally. That is, we prefer factual truth to metaphorically expressed truth. Let me give a very simple example of what I mean by metaphorical. The sentence, "My life is like an apple," can be interpreted factually or metaphorically. Factually understood, it could mean this: the apple and I both have living cells; we both grow to maturity, die and decay. Metaphorically, the sentence might mean that both the apple and I smell sweet, where my "smelling sweet" is a figure of speech having to do with qualities not factually odoriferous. The sentence might also mean that both the apple and I are nourishing to other people, where my being "nourishing" does not mean that I am giving people my thighs for their pot roast. Most of us tolerate metaphorical expressions of this simple sort, but many of us panic when we are asked to think metaphorically about the Infinite. Clearly, when someone, like the author of a Psalm, speaks of the Infinite as having eyes and ears and living in heaven, we need to grasp that such languaging is a metaphorical mode of expression.

Nevertheless, it tends to be important to many modern people whether heaven is a "fact" or "just a metaphor" as we say. Is there really a "place" a "factual spiritual realm" in which God dwells? And is God a factual supernatural being who dwells in this factual supernatural place? We ask such questions so easily that we may find it hard to believe that such questions were not being asked by the Psalmists. The Psalmists certainly used the two-tiered language of heaven and earth, but the Psalmists would not have been able to make the fine distinctions we require today between factual and metaphorical. Clearly, they were quite at ease with metaphorically expressed truth; they did not have our bias toward factual truth. Truth for them had to do with *experienced* actualities, but not simply with *factual* actualities. And they were able, without pause,

to express their experienced actualities metaphorically.

God, for the Psalmists, was an experienced actuality which they expressed metaphorically with images like heaven, almighty, will, mind, eye, strong right arm, and even bosom. For us to believe that these Psalmists had, or even thought they had, a literal factual knowledge about a literal Supreme Being in a literal super realm is to impose upon these religious giants a modern superstition. The notion that they thought about God in this literalistic way is a theory of such unlikelihood that we might well be astonished that so many modern people hold firmly to this preposterous view.

Our literalistic supernaturalism does estrange us from nature, but it is we members of modern civilizations who are profoundly estranged from nature, not the Psalmists. And we became estranged from nature without any help from the Psalmists. The writer of Psalm 8 clearly stands in Awe of nature, feels communion with nature, knows God through (not apart from) the sky, the moon and the stars. Slowly, some of us have become keenly aware that we scarcely pay attention anymore to the moon and the stars. In our smoggy cities we may not even see them for weeks. Many of us are becoming aware that we are not talking with nature enough--that we need to go to the country or to the wilderness and commune with nature more closely. We are aware that our urbanized (and even ruralized) life styles have turned nature into a field of concrete, steel, and strictly managed life forms. The grasses have become yards. The trees and bushes and flowers have become landscapes. The animals have become pets or livestock. The plants we eat have become produce. The animals we eat have become cuts of meat. Nature as a wild reality has been pushed away from us by our aggressive social world.

And for the most part, we wish to push nature away. The wildness of nature threatens our sense of order. The wildness of nature includes death which is the ultimate threat to our security. Many of the funeral practices of our society attempt to mask death, pretend it has not intruded upon us, domesticate it, make it a part of society, even view death as a doorway to some further orderly human existence rather than as the final termination to every mode of experiencing we possess.

David Abram in his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, tells how the typical shaman in primitive tribal society lived on the edge of the village, that is, lived in touch with the wildness of nature beyond society. This was his or her power, to be a source of awareness that came to society from "nature"-- from that surrounding actuality which is beyond society. The shaman's job was to help society remain connected to nature. The sicknesses with which the shaman dealt were sicknesses of estrangement from this grounding nature. And by "nature" is meant the encompassing reality upon which society depended, but from which society was always tempted to flee away into its own created versions of reality.

The biblical Psalm writer is somewhat like that typical tribal shaman. Each Psalm is written to challenge social reality and to restore the connection of social reality with that which is beyond social reality. Nature is beyond social reality. Yet the "beyond" of the Psalmists is not simply "nature" as something sensually experienced by human beings and the other animals. The Psalmists dialogue is with a "beyond" that is beyond society and beyond nature. The Psalmists see nature as a medium through which an even more beyond "beyond" is being met. If we say that both society and nature are finite actualities, we can say that the Psalmists are dialoguing with Infinite actuality. Infinite actuality is beyond every finite beyondness. Yet no finite actuality is more "close at hand" than Infinite actuality. Our contact with the Infinite is immediately experienced. The Infinite is not an abstract idea, but an actuality that is inescapable. The Infinite Silence may be Silent, but this Silence is LOUD in its ACTION as the bestower of all the actualities of our lives.

So if we are going to talk with the Psalm writers about nature we may have to revise what we mean by the term "nature." "Nature" for the Psalm writers is certainly not a machine, a

great clock running on its own after its initial beginning. "Nature" is more like clods of finite actuality thrown at us daily by that Infinite actuality with whom we are in inescapable interaction. For the Psalmists, God and nature are not separate. If we are not experiencing the Infinite Silence in our experience of nature, then we are not experiencing fully what the Psalmists mean by "nature." And if the "God" we say we are experiencing is not being experienced in and through nature, it is not the God of the Psalmists we are experiencing. Following the wisdom of the Psalmists, I am willing to insist that any "God" who is experienced apart from nature is not the Infinite God at all, but simply a finite idea in our heads, or a finite feeling in our bodies, or a finite state of consciousness conjured up by our religious practices. The God of the Psalmists is distinguished from nature only in the sense that finite actuality can be distinguished from Infinite actuality. In our actual living, our experiences of the finite and our experiences of the Infinite take place at the same times and in the same places. So understood, God and nature are united in each and every space-time event that happens to us.

So in the view of the Psalmists, God is the God of nature and nature is God's action. Neither nature nor God can be understood apart from one another. This approach to both nature and the Infinite is a fruitful challenge to both the philosophies and the theologies of our ensuing millennium.

6. Holy Hopelessness

Psalm 22

At first sight, Psalm 22 reflects the sort of experience you never want to happen to yourself or to anyone. Some have found this Psalm, and a few others like it, too gloomy to read in their worship services.

The authors of the passion narrative which is contained in the first three gospels of the New Testament place upon the lips of Jesus the first line of this Psalm. As the passion narrative unfolds, we find other details of this Psalm appearing. This is no accident. These inventors of New Testament religion were using this Psalm to interpret what it meant to them for Jesus to be hanging upon the cross. Contemporary literalism has completely missed the point. Literally speaking, we do not know what Jesus said while he was hanging on the cross. All those who cared what he said, and would have been interested in remembering what he said, had fled. The details of the passion narrative were made up later as a way of exploring the meaning of the raw fact that Jesus had been put to death in this disgraceful way by the Roman authorities.

Also, it is wrong to think of this Psalm as a prediction of events in the life of Jesus. This Psalm was written to express events in the lives of those who wrote it. And whoever wrote this Psalm was not an unapproachable saint. He or she was someone not unlike you or me, someone who was simply living human life more profoundly and openly than is usual for our species.

Further, we need not take the images of this Psalm literally. Phrases like “a herd of bulls surrounds me” or “a ring of ruffians rings me round” may not have literally happened to this Psalmist. And even though, literally speaking, such events may not be happening to us, we can perhaps identify with the feelings expressed by such images. If we have ever done something so true and appropriate that most people were offended and angry with us, we have experienced these bulls and these ruffians.

Finally, I do not want us to stumble over the phrase “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” I have heard the question asked, “Did God really forsake Jesus, or does God really forsake anyone?” Such a question attempts to look at this Psalm from God’s point of view. No one possesses that viewpoint. Also, such a question attempts to understand life abstractly--to begin our theological thinking with ideas rather than with experiences. The first line of this Psalm is an expression of a human experience. The same human experience is being expressed in the second, third and fourth lines:

My God , my God, why have your forsaken me
and are so far from saving me, from heeding my groans?
O my God, I cry in the day-time but You do not answer;
in the night I cry but get no respite.

These lines can remind us of all those moments in our lives when our most fervent begging for a different life went ungranted.

It is important to notice that the attitude of this Psalm is not stoical resignation before some uncaring fate. This Psalmist is not denying the existence or the love of God simply because the Psalmist is not being granted what is requested. This Psalmist, like all the other Psalm writers, is clear that the existence of the Infinite is never, never the question. The Infinite just is; about the

enduring actuality of the Infinite only a complete fool has any question. The question of this Psalmist is a question addressed to the Infinite, "Why don't you help me in the way I wish to be helped?" Further, the Infinite, so addressed, is being trusted. Trusting the Infinite is what it means to say to the Infinite, "My God, my God."

So let us now read aloud this Psalm, realizing that it is a Psalm of trust, however grim it may be. It is a dramatization of what it means to trust at the furthest extremities of human experience.

The lights on the stage and in the massive auditorium are completely out. Only a thin shaft of light circles the Psalmist who, kneeling on the stage, looks out into the darkness. The tone of voice is fairly loud and pleading.

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me . . .
and are so far from saving me, . . . from heeding my groans?
O my God, I cry in the day-time but you do not answer; . . .
in the night I cry but get no respite.

And yet You are enthroned in holiness,
You are the One whose praises Israel sings.
In You our fathers put their trust;
they trusted, and You did rescue them.
Unto You they cried and were delivered;
in You they trusted and were not put to shame. . . .

But I am like a worm, not human, . . .
abused by all human beings, . . .
scorned by my own people. . . .
All who see me jeer at me,
make mouths at me and wag their heads;
"He threw himself on the Infinite Silence for rescue,
Let the Infinite deliver him, for the Infinite holds him dear!" . . .

Indeed, You are the One who drew me from the womb,
who laid me at my mother's breast . . .
Upon You was I cast at birth;
from my mother's womb . . . You . . . have been my God. . . .
So be not far from me now,
for trouble is near, and I have no helper. . . .
A herd of bulls surrounds me,
great bulls of Bashan beset me. . . .
Raving and roaring lions
open their mouths wide against me. . . .
My strength drains away like water
and all my bones are loose. . . .

My heart has turned to wax and melts within me.
My mouth is dry as a potsherd
and my tongue sticks to my jaw; . . .
I am laid low in the dust of death. . . .
The huntsmen are all about me;
a band of ruffians rings me round,
they have hacked off my hands and feet. . .
I tell my tale of misery,
while they look on and gloat.
They share out my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothes. . . .

But do not remain so far away, O Infinite Silence. . .
O my help, hasten to my aid.
Deliver my very self from the sword,
my precious life from the axe.
Save me from the lion's mouth,
my poor body from the horns of the wild ox. . . .
I will declare Your fame to my companions; . . .
I will praise You in the midst of the assembly. . . .

“Yes, praise the Infinite, you who worship the Infinite Silence;
all you descendants of Jacob, do honor to the Infinite;
stand in awe of the Infinite, all descendants of Israel.
For the Infinite has not scorned the downtrodden,
nor shrunk in loathing from his plight,
nor turned attention from him,
but gave heed to him when he cried out.” . . .

You do inspire my praise in the full assembly;
and I will pay my vows before all who worship You. . . .

The lights now come up in the auditorium, and the Psalmist looks out across the vast crowd.

Let the humble eat and be satisfied. . .
Let those who seek the Infinite praise the Infinite
and be in good heart for ever. . .
Let all the ends of the earth remember
and turn again to the Infinite Silence. . .
Let all the families of all nations bow down before the Infinite.
For kingly power belongs to the Infinite Silence,
and the Infinite has dominion over all nations. . . .

But how can those buried in the earth do homage to the Infinite Silence? . . .
How can those who go down in the grave bow before the Infinite? . . .
But I shall live for the sake of the Infinite Silence.
My descendants shall serve the Infinite Silence. . .
And this shall be told of the Infinite Silence to future generations:
they shall call the Infinite trustworthy
declaring to a people yet unborn
that my deliverance was the doing of the Infinite.

The Psalmist now rises and walks off into the darkness. The spotlight remains on the empty stage and the entire auditorium is hushed for a considerable length of time.

If this Psalm awakened a few tears of Awe within you, then you know, at some level, that this Psalm is about your life as well as Jesus or some other “saintly” person. Each of us have experienced extremities. The question is whether or not we have interpreted those extremities in the light of this Psalm or in some other way.

This Psalm, properly understood, demolishes all sentimental ideas of God or of God’s deliverance. The deliverance spoken about in the end of this Psalm does not always mean that the delivered person actually escapes death or suffering. Jesus did not. Many other sincere persons of intense prayer were not relieved from all their thorns. Yet this Psalmist believes in deliverance, in a deliverance that can be told about to future generations. To understand this fully, we must be able to imagine that we can be delivered in the midst of all our sufferings if not also from them. We are not always delivered from the lion’s mouth or from the horns of the wild ox. We may experience instead an interior deliverance, a secret deliverance taking place in the lion’s mouth or on the horns of the wild ox--a deliverance consisting of trusting the Infinite where all objective supports for such trust are missing. Such trust can, however, be told about to future generations. Surely this is a clue to understanding the deliverance celebrated in the New Testament. Even death cannot win over those who trust the Infinite. The Spirit of trust soars through death, and this deliverance is told to future generations that they too may soar.

7. Gathering in Sheer Delight

Psalm 133

Many Psalms, like Psalm 22 take us to the boundaries of oblivion; other Psalms, like 133, focus on the sheer delight of the Spirit life. Picture reading aloud the following rewording of Psalm 133 at the beginning of some meeting you are having with your most intimate Spirit companions.

How good it is . . . and how pleasant . .
for Spirit companions to gather together! . . .

It is fragrant as perfume poured upon the head
and running down the chin
and onto your shirt. . . .

It is like the dew falling upon the hills
of your homeland. . . .

Upon such gatherings the Infinite Silence
bestows the blessing
of life that has no end.

The author of this Psalm clearly knew the delight of gathering with persons who could reflect to one another the best of human authenticity. To be intimate in this way is indeed blessed. For in such gatherings, the quality of life that is amplified is the life for which humanity was made--the life toward which humanity is being redeemed. Such life is properly called Eternal Life.

I am reminded of a television commercial in which a group of people are drinking beer and one of them says, "It doesn't get any better than this." Such a line is literally true only when it applies to a gathering of Spirit companions. Other gatherings may be delightful, and yet they are just another pleasant and fleeting moment unless some grounding in the Eternal is present. When our true Spirit Life is present, the meaning and purpose of being human is manifest. We wish to return again and again to such moments, and we can; for these moments simply reflect who we really are beneath all the dross we have invented to escape our true greatness.

Spirit community is a strange reality, for the Spirit life is an intense aloneness, an aloneness that never goes away. A million Spirit companions do not in any way lessen our total aloneness. Yet the intentional gathering of willingly alone beings is, paradoxically, the only intimacy that is not clearly or vaguely disappointing. It is not possible to exaggerate the delight of a genuine Spirit gathering. In this delight, we know why authentic community draws the human spirit to return again and again and again.

If we are bored with our group experiences, we are bored because a true Spirit gathering is not happening. Something has replaced the gift of Eternal aliveness. Perhaps our gathering is only a gathering for reassurance that we believe the right teachings, practice the right principles, style our lives in the right way. If so, we gather for security in the finite, rather than for experiencing together the insecurity, the oblivion, and the challenge of being a community which is consciously relating to the Infinite. Only that preposterously intense gathering --

relating to the Infinite--is blessed with the delight that knows no exaggeration.

How good it is . . . and how pleasant . .
for Spirit companions to gather together!

8. Holy Bitterness

Psalm 137

We are inclined to exclude some of our feelings from our worship practices. But the inclusion of Psalm 137 in the collection of Psalms seems to imply that all feelings, all parts of our lives are fit to be included in the worship of the Infinite Silence.

Psalm 137 has been especially offensive to our modern pieties. Wanting our worship to be a time of nice feelings and uplifting moral considerations, we have excluded all those parts of our lives that would match this Psalm's expression of grief, bitterness, and vengeful anger. Rather than allow such feelings to just be there as parts of our lives, we tend to advise one another: "Pull yourself together." "Forget the past." "Put on a smiling face." "Cheer up." "If you can't say something kind, don't say anything at all."

So let us, with some help from Psalm 137, rip through these shells of pretense and admit how we feel when an assassin has killed a political leader upon whom we were counting, or a terrorist has bombed innocent people whom we knew, or when some large corporation has dumped or spilled toxins that threaten whole species of life, or when we or those close to us are verbally or physically assaulted because of our race, our religion, our gender, our sexual orientation, or our homeland.

All of us have experienced more moments of this type than we wish to remember. So, as we read this Psalm, let us allow those uncomfortable parts of our lives to come forth. And let us be aware that this coming forth is part of what it means to worship the Infinite Silence.

I imagine this Psalmist as an elderly grandmother, seated on the stage and talking to a crowd of younger folk. The lights are low. The masses of humankind sit in the semi-darkness. The voice tone is intensely sober.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept . .
when we remembered Zion. . . .
There on the willow-trees
we hung up our harps,
for there those who carried us off
demanded music and singing,
our captors called on us to be merry:
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'
How could we sing our songs of celebration
in a foreign land?

The Psalmist now looks out into the darkness of the past and speaks to the now demolished temple city in a loud and determined tone.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither away; . .

let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you, . . .
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

The Psalmist now looks farther out into the darkness and speaks to her God.

Remember, O Infinite Silence, against the people of Edom
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
when they said, 'Down with it, down with it.
down to its very foundations!'

The Psalmist now looks into the audience and addresses those who have acted to destroyed her precious value.

O Babylon, . . . Babylon the destroyer, . . .
happy the person who repays you
for all that you have done to us! . . .
Happy be the one who shall seize your children
and dash them against the rock.

The Psalmist holds her gaze toward the hushed auditorium and then returns into herself and lowers her head as the lights fade.

Let us just experience for a moment the feelings of grief and revenge so forcefully expressed by these poetic lines.

Have we not all had these feelings? Are we ashamed of them? If the image of seizing children and dashing them against the rock throws you, then bring forth your own images: beating a willful murderer to a pulp, or frying him in an electric chair, or whatever.

Of course, revenge is a horrible feeling to feel. And it is an even more horrible feeling to carry out in action. Furthermore, carrying out revenge does not in any way assist us with our grief. This Psalm is not about ethics, not about action, not about appropriate forms of punishment. This Psalm is about grief. This Psalm is about honoring a great value that someone has destroyed. This Psalm is about how we feel toward such destroyers and toward such losses. So let us allow this Psalm to just stand there instructing us about the dynamics of grief. And let us hear its message that grief, all aspects of our grief, are appropriate to bring into our worship practices when we are indeed worshiping the Infinite Silence.

The Infinite Silence listens to our grief. The Infinite Silence accepts us as persons who grieve. The Infinite Silence respects us as persons who can commit ourselves to primary values and who thus do grieve when those values are lost.

If we wish to take a moral lesson from this Psalm, let us follow the example of the Infinite Silence. Let us be silent: let us listen to others when they grieve. Let us listen to ourselves when we grieve. Let us honor ourselves that we value something enough to grieve over its loss. Let us make space for grief in our lives. And let us let grief run its course, making us more sober and more wise about the inevitable comings and goings of our lives.

Yes, if we cannot weep when weeping is appropriate, let us hire people to weep for us, rather than hire them to tell us that we must pull ourselves together. Reading this Psalm occasionally can remind us that there are times when we need to simply sit down and weep-- to let our intense, sad and angry feelings flow until their flowing is complete.

Having affirmed the validity and place of this Psalm, I want to say a final word on ethics and revenge. When we get up from our grieving chair and move into living our lives on the other side of our deep losses, revenge is never what we need to do. Feeling our feelings of grief, which include feelings of revenge, is one thing; acting on those feelings is another thing. Our action needs to be based, not on our feelings, but on our calm commitment to justice. An action for justice can include requiring retribution from the violators of our objectively defined laws, but such an action is not the same thing as acting out our strong feelings of revenge. Vengeful action is simply a sign that we have not yet completed our grieving.

Herein lies a very deep confusion in our understanding of the biblical tradition. The sort of love that is the biblical foundation for ethical action is not a feeling of any sort. Loving your enemies makes no sense whatsoever if love is a feeling. Loving your enemies means doing good to those who actively oppose you. Loving your enemies means doing good to those toward whom you feel bitter and vengeful. "Doing good" can mean putting an enemy in jail. It can even mean taking lives. But usually, "doing good to enemies" means some sort of honest confrontation combined with a thorough-going honoring of the existence of these "God-given" opponents in your life. Such action is not revenge. Such action may heap burning coals on the heads of your opponents and feel worse to them than vengeful action. But Spirit love need not mean doing what your opponents want. Spirit love need not even consider whether or not our enemies wish to be loved. Spirit love is rooted in the fact that all enemies are given by the Infinite Silence, and therefore every response to an enemy is a response to the Infinite Silence. If we trust the Infinite Silence to be love toward us, then we can love our enemies in an objective and cool fashion as part of our love for the Infinite Silence. And this has nothing whatsoever to do with revenge.

Nevertheless, we do feel vengeful when deep values are violated, and those feelings are valid human feelings. The entire idea of retributive justice is, to some extent, rooted in these natural vengeful feelings. But while a prison sentence for a major theft may express revenge to some extent, prison sentences need to be constructed from some other ethical foundation than allowing human beings to express their feelings of revenge. Feelings of revenge are part of the grieving process, not foundations for ethical action.

With these clarifications in mind, we can bring Psalm 137 back into our worship services, including its horrific closing line.

9. Deliverance from Guilt

Psalm 51

Of all the states of being that are possible to the human species, guilt is the one we most persistently seek to avoid. What is guilt? It is the pain we feel when our behaviors do not correspond with our images of what is good behavior. Good behavior may be defined in many ways: that which conforms to the rules we honor, that which achieves the goals we seek, or that which is appropriate in the situations in which we live. The Psalm writers are almost entirely preoccupied with rules which they call laws, commandments, or precepts,

We sometimes avoid guilt relative to our disobedience of various rules by not taking the rules seriously. And many rules in our lives today do not need to be taken seriously. Some rules merely define practical conveniences or minor courtesies. Other rules are unjust or oppressive, rules that deserve to be disobeyed. But when the Psalm writers speak of rules, they are understanding their rules as ways of giving embodiment to an Infinite command. Obeying this Infinite command is tied up with finding the integrity appropriate for being a fully authentic human being. So obedience to this Infinite command and to the various rules that seek to give this command specific finite embodiment are taken very seriously by the Psalm writers and by the entire Mosaic community of which they are members.

In such an environment of thinking, guilt is a major factor in human experience. If we modern humans were that serious about our rules, or our goals, or our appropriate behaviors, guilt would play a larger role in our lives.

Many of us today have managed to avoid all definitions of human authenticity or primal integrity and have therefore weakened the bite of our images of good behavior and thereby weakened the guilt we feel for our “bad” behavior. Some of us have so committed ourselves to philosophies of relativity that the concept of “good behavior” almost ceases to exist for us. Some psychologically oriented thinkers in our midst seem to imply that all guilt is some sort of antiquated hangover from a strict childhood. Such guilt, we are told, must be gotten over. The psychologically healthy person, such thinking implies, is not plagued by guilt.

There is, of course, truth in the assertion that all rules, goals, or definitions of appropriate behavior are relative, finite, changeable realities that can differ vastly from culture to culture and from period to period in one’s life time. A rule that is serious in Eskimo society may not be meaningful in ours. A rule that was serious in our childhood may be simply irrelevant in present time. Some rules were never relevant. So many of the guilts that go with such rules need to be gotten over. Such guilts can be set aside as inappropriate guilts for our healthy present-time living.

But such “neurotic guilt” is only a sub-set within a larger universe of guilt, not all of which is neurotic. If we are, for example, truly committed to the survival of our species, then we are all guilty for the ecological destruction of the planet that so much of our common behavior is accomplishing. If you are a woman who wishes to recover your power and integrity from the patterns of patriarchy, then you will feel an appropriate guilt for your failures to do so. If you are a man who no longer views patriarchal prerogatives as the normal functioning for your life, then you will feel an appropriate guilt for your slips into those patterns. If you are a person who has discovered that freedom is an authentic quality of human life, then you can feel guilty for making excuses for yourself, for blaming others for your failings, for having victim images about what is actually possible, or for your shoddy thinking that tells you that all guilt is neurotic.

So while the Psalm writers may not have felt guilty in exactly the same ways as we do and for exactly the same things that we do, we can experience ourselves as sharing a common humanity with the Psalmists with regard to this subject of guilt. And if we can begin to honestly confess our own guilt as a real and serious part of our actual lives, then we can learn something from the Psalmists about how we may be victorious over our most intense experiences of guilt. Psalm 51 provides a salutary lesson in this regard.

This Psalmist is all alone on the vast stage and is addressing the Infinite Silence. The house lights are low. The stage is slightly brighter. The voice tone is firm and almost commanding in a pleading sort of way.

Be gracious to me, O Trusted One, in your true love; . . .
in the fullness of your mercy blot out my misdeeds. . . .

Wash away all my guilt,
and cleanse me from my sin. . . .
For well I know my misdeeds,
and my sins confront me all the day long. . . .

Against You, You only, I have sinned
and done what displeases You. . . .
Therefore, You are correct in your charges
and just in passing sentence. . . .

In iniquity I was brought forth at my birth
and my mother conceived me in sin; . . .
yet, though You have hidden this truth in darkness,
through this mystery You are teaching me wisdom. . . .

Take spices and sprinkle me, that I may be clean;
wash me, that I may become cleaner⁶ than snow; . . .
Let me hear the sound of joy and gladness,
let the bones dance which You have broken. . . .
Turn away your face from my sins
and blot out all my guilt. . . .

Create a pure heart in me, O Trusted One,
and give me a new and steadfast spirit; . . .
do not drive me from Your presence
or take Your Holy Spirit from me. . . .

⁶ I have substituted the word “cleaner” for the word “whiter” because the association of “white” with “clean” in our racially mixed culture implies that “black” is unclean. I do not believe that the Psalmist meant anything racial by his choice of words. Probably the color opposite to white in the Psalmist’s mind was red or bloody. In another part of this Psalm, I have retained the image “darkness” because I believe that the context makes clear that “blindness” or “refusal to see the light” is the meaning intended.

revive in me the joy of Your deliverance
and grant me a willing spirit to uphold me. . . .

I will teach transgressors the ways that lead to You,
and sinners shall return to You again. . .
O Infinite Silence, my deliverer, save me from condemnation,
and I will sing the praises of Your justice. . .
Open my lips, O Infinite Silence,
that my mouth may proclaim Your praise. . . .

You have no delight in sacrifice;
if I brought You an offering, You would not accept it. . .
My sacrifice, O Trusted One, . . is a broken spirit; . . .
a wounded heart, O Trusted One, . . You will not despise.

The Psalmist rises and walks quietly off the stage.⁷

This Psalmist brings to the dialogue with Infinite Silence an immense sense of guilt. Further, this Psalmist understands that all this guilt results from a disrelationship with the Infinite. The Psalmist may have violated self and neighbor, yet the Psalmist views all violation as against the Infinite Silence. It is the Infinite relationship which gives guilt its power. And it is also within the Infinite relationship that the Psalmist has found authenticity or primal integrity. So it is within the Infinite relationship that the Psalmist expects to find relief from the pains and sufferings resulting from his guilt.

The following phrases express the trust of the Psalmist that the Infinite Silence has the power to change the grim consequences of having grievously violated the good and thus become guilty: "Be gracious to me;" "Blot out my misdeeds;" "Wash away all my guilt;" "Cleanse me from my sin;" "cleaner than snow."

In an even more positive vein, the Psalmist asks to "hear the sound of joy and gladness" and to have "the bones dance," to have "a pure heart in me," "a new and steadfast spirit," to experience "the joy of Your deliverance," "a willing spirit to uphold me."

This understanding that the Infinite Silence has the power to totally alter my "karma" (to wash my past and purify my future) is a very different view than any notion of a moral universe that simply plays itself out according to rigid rules. The Psalmist is profoundly guilty and does not attempt to minimize that, but guilt can be washed if you go to the right source for the washing. The Infinite Silence is the right Source. The Infinite relationship can wash all the misdeeds of the finite person and fill that person with power to live in a guiltless relationship with the Infinite. Indeed the Infinite can put Holy Spirit within the person who comes to the Infinite with the proper sacrifice.

⁷ The following lines appear at the end of Psalm 51, but they seem to be another poem added on to this poem.

Let it be Your desire to do good to Zion
to build anew the walls of Jerusalem.
Only after that can You delight in the appointed sacrifices;
then shall young bulls be offered on Your altar.

And what is that proper sacrifice? Is it a young bull turned into rising smoke on the proper altar? No, the proper sacrifice is more difficult than that and more simple. The proper sacrifice is “a broken spirit; a wounded heart.” What does that mean?

Guilt is the result of wishing to be proud of one’s behavior but failing to do so. My honest experience of whatever guilt has actually happened to me is a wounded heart or a broken spirit. It is my pride that guilt has broken. And it is my pride that does not wish to confess this brokenness, this guilt. But this is the sacrifice we must bring to the Infinite to be victorious over guilt: the honest acknowledgement of the guilt. Just as we must acknowledge our finitude to stand before the Infinite, so we must acknowledge our guilt.

Guilt is not the same thing as finitude. But the finite human person almost inevitably becomes guilty, because the finite person wishes to be Infinite. The lust of a child molester is a wish to be infinite, a wish to be unlimited by the child’s need for honor, a wish to be unrestrained in doing whatever is craved. The pride of someone who will not confess their shameful deeds is a wish to be Infinite, a wish to be unlimited by the actuality of the misdeeds. All the seven deadly sins might be defined as wishes to be Infinite:

Lust: I accept no limits to my desires.

Sloth: Don’t push me; I wish to be infinitely comfortable.

Greed: Only more than I have will make me happy.

Envy: The grass is always greener in someone else’s skin.

Jealousy: I can never trust the ones I love to love me best.

Rage: What is wrong with my life is your fault.

Pride: My actions and my attitudes are all correct or excusable.

This multiformed desire to be Infinite is the essence of all the sin of which each of us is guilty. This is why the Psalmist can say to the Infinite:

Against You, You only, I have sinned
and done what displeases You.

Therefore, You are correct in your charges
and just in passing sentence.

All sin is sin against the Infinite. Sin is the refusal to let the Infinite be the Infinite, the Infinite which limits us, the Infinite which makes the continuing demand upon us to be our finite actuality.

So when we are guilty, we are guilty before the Infinite. We may have violated self and others, but we are guilty before the Infinite. To be guilty only before others is to assume wrongly that some other person can give us the criteria for our authenticity. To be guilty only before ourselves is to assume wrongly that we ourselves can give ourselves the criteria for our authenticity. The criteria for our authenticity is given by the Infinite. So it is before the Infinite that we are essentially guilty. Even when we are guilty in a court of law or in agreements we have made with other persons, or in vows we have made to ourselves, we are also guilty before the Infinite. And this Infinite dimension of our guilt is the essence of guilt. “Against the Infinite, the Infinite only, have I sinned.”

Therefore, if the Infinite counts not my sin against me, then I am washed clean. It does not matter what others think about me. It does not matter what I think about myself. If the Infinite counts me clean as snow, then I am clean, purified, my guilt has been taken away, a new spirit

has been put within me, broken bones dance, sounds of joy and gladness are heard.

So does the Infinite count me clean as snow in spite of all my bloody and dingy sin? The Psalmist clearly believes that this is a request you and I can make to the Infinite and that we can expect from the Infinite a positive answer.

My sacrifice, O Trusted One, is a broken spirit;
a wounded heart, O Trusted One, You will not despise.

Do you, do I, believe this? This is the question we now confront. Does the Infinite accept the sinful person who no longer proudly denies his or her sin, but frankly brings to the Infinite this sacrifice of a broken spirit? Well, what does your experience teach you? Have you experienced every misdeed being held against you forever, or have you experienced fresh starts, times when all your past living became simply the past, a past which no longer enslaves your future, a past which is simply the past which brought you to this moment of new possibility when fresh purity is there before you, there for the taking? What is your experience?

This Psalmist is challenging us with his or her experience. In this Psalm, we see a witness to a very deep awareness of guilt and yet a witness to a very deep awareness of the manner in which we may find victory over our guilt.

I want to examine one more stanza of this Psalm:

In iniquity I was brought forth at my birth
and my mother conceived me in sin;
yet, though You have hidden this truth in darkness,
through this mystery You are teaching me wisdom.

The Psalmist is not saying here that birth and conception are nasty realities. The Psalmist is not saying that fleshly existence is sinful because it is fleshly or finite. But the Psalmist is clearly disagreeing with our common view that sin is merely an individualistic record, a report card on our behavior since the clean slate of our birth. Sin, according to the Psalmist, predates our birth. Sin was going on before we joined the party and added our own participation to that sin. To see this sociological dimension of sin is to find wisdom, is to see a profound mystery, is to root out a truth hidden in darkness.

It is another expression of our pride that we want our own life to be purifiable by our own efforts, that we want to be on our own, making a record for ourselves by our own deeds. The truth is deeper: we are in this life together with the entire human species. The sin of any other person is in some mysterious sense also my sin. And my sin taints the entire family of humanity as well. It is not appropriate to set ourselves off from the Adolf Hitlers, rapists, child molesters, thieves and serial killers. Whatever is done by any member of humanity is also our doing. Each of us is humanity. We are in this together. If we do not understand the capacity for evil in each and every other human being, we do not understand ourselves. If we think that the criminals we lock up in our jails are some other species, we do not understand ourselves. If we think that the criminals locked up in our jails are any less capable of sainthood than we are, we do not understand ourselves.

Also, we must see the sociological nature of sin in still another sense. Our most grievous violations of the Infinite are those we do in concert with standard operating procedures of our entire society. If our society is organized in a headlong momentum toward ecological catastrophe (and it is), then we, each of us, are participants in that sin. And this group sin is part

of our sin against the Infinite which we take to the Infinite for purification. We are in this together. The sin of our society is our sin, and we can begin the process of purification by acknowledging that sin. And when we are washed clean of that sin, we are set immediately to “the task of teaching transgressors the ways that lead to the Infinite.” That is, we are the early members of our society in acknowledging the sins that afflict us all and thereby we become the teachers of those who are still too proud to bring this sacrifice of a broken spirit to the Infinite judgment bench.

I will teach transgressors the ways that lead to You,
and sinners shall return to You again.

And how does this return happen?

You have no delight in sacrifice;
if I brought You an offering, You would not accept it.
My sacrifice, O Trusted One, is a broken spirit;
a wounded heart, O Trusted One, You will not despise.

10. The Happiness of Primal Integrity

Psalm 1

Many of the Psalms, including the very first Psalm, focus on the subject of law and on how obedience to law leads to happiness. Likewise, disobedience to law leads, according to these Psalms, to unhappiness.

To our modern sensibilities this can seem a simplistic view of the way life works. For we know that laws come and go, that all laws are finite constructions of human beings, and that responsible living often requires of us some far more creative responses than simply obeying a set of laws or moral principles.

One of the difficulties we face in our dialogue with Old Testament writers is that we do not understand their view of law. They see the specific laws of their culture as attempts to give concrete down-to-earth embodiment to an Infinite law. In our modern literalistic and materialistic culture we do not readily understand what the metaphor “Infinite law” might be pointing to in our actual human experience. So we do not have a ready understanding of how our finite, humanly created laws might be giving embodiment to some mysterious Infinite demand.

In Psalm 1, we encounter the phrase “the law of YAHWEH.” The “law” indicated by this phrase is an Infinite law, and this Infinite law is not synonymous with a finite set of rules. The Infinite law is something more than the ten commandments or any expansion of the ten commandments. The ten commandments may express this law, but this law is an Infinite law, the finite manifestation of which is never complete. I am not sure we have a common term in the English language that is adequate to express in poetic imagery what I mean to indicate with the abstract term “Infinite law.” In my rephrasing of Psalm 1, I will substitute for “the law of YAHWEH” this phrase: “the total demand of the Infinite Silence.”

Similarly, terms like “the wicked,” and “the righteous” are problematical terms for us. They are problematical because our immediate responses to these terms are inappropriate for the meaning of this Psalm. The wicked or the sinners, in the Psalmist’s context, are something more than violators of the accepted rules: they are rebels from a full obedience to the Infinite Silence. This Psalm is grappling with something more profound than whether or not someone is obeying a set of moral rules. The Psalm is grappling with what we might call our “primal integrity,” our choice to be or not to be the person we actually are.

So I am going to reword this Psalm in order to more clearly reveal this concern with our primal integrity. Also this Psalm persists in using the term “man” for what we today mean when we say “person.” I considered substituting the word “person” for the word “man” in my rephrasing, but something is lost when this is done. A more personal, specifically individual tone is needed. So I have chosen to substitute for the term “man” the term “woman.” This will force us to see the meaning of this Psalm more clearly. Then if those of us who are men want to reread the Psalm using the term “man,” we can.

So using these important rewordings, let us now read this Psalm aloud.

The Psalmist is talking with an intimate group of people in the center of a vast stage. A full auditorium of people are listening. I see this Psalmist as a old woman. She picks out one of the younger women in the group assembled around her and she looks into her eyes as she talks. The voice of the Psalmist is confidential but also loud enough to express the full force of her confidence.

Happy is the woman
who does not take the peddlers of illusion for her guide, . .
nor walk the path of those who flee from reality, . .
nor find her status among those who hate the truth. . . .

Rather, commitment to the total demand of the Infinite Silence is her delight. .
Responding to this demand her meditation day and night. . . .

She is like a tree planted near the water flow,
which yields its fruit in season
and its leaf never withers. . . .
In all that she does, she flourishes. . . .

The peddlers of illusion are not like that: . .
they are like chaff driven by the wind. . .
When the inevitable reckoning of the Infinite Silence takes place,
those who count on illusions shall not stand firm; . .
nor shall they find solidarity in the community of responsible humanity. . . .

The Infinite Silence stands guard over the path of responsible living, . .
but the life styles of the illusion peddlers shall perish.

I now see this Psalmist, this elderly woman looking into the eyes of each person gathered around her. After a few moments of silence, she rises and comes out to the front of the stage and looks into the eyes of various members of the entire gathering of humanity who are assembled there. She does not smile, she does not frown. Then she breaks eye contact and briskly walks off the stage. As the lights come up in the auditorium, the audience is uncertain whether to jeer or cheer. Some, however, neither jeer nor cheer, neither smile nor frown, they simply leave this place of Psalm performance and move into refreshed lives of persistent responsibility, taking with them the old woman's deep inward happiness.

Happy is the woman, happy is the man, happy is the person who rejects illusion and walks the truth. And what is this truth that assures a happy life? In our society we are being constantly brainwashed to believe that the good life is found by getting enough education to get a good job which earns good money which can buy us the good things we need to be happy. This is one of the illusions which our Psalm writer is recommending that we avoid. These illusion peddlers of the typical good life are like chaff driven by the wind, and so are all who follow them. They have no roots, their so-called "good life" is shallow. The happy life is something that money cannot buy.

It is astonishing to me how many times I have heard people say that money cannot buy happiness, and then I see those same people anxiously questing for the money to buy some phantom of happiness they think they seek. Saying pious slogans is not the essence of the happy life. Action is the only path to happiness. Responsible action is happiness. It is not that we are happy, so we act responsibly. It is not that we act responsibly and thereby become happy. No, responsible action is happiness. Every other action is chaff driven by the wind, action found wanting, action that shall perish, action that shall not stand firm nor find solidarity in the community of responsible humanity.

If we are seeking the good life through acquiring more money, we are simply deluded. We are acting out of the illusion that this is the path that leads to happiness. This path does lead somewhere, but not to happiness. If you want to be happy, you simply have to walk a different path: you have to walk the path that leads to happiness, the path that is happiness, walk and all. So what is that path, according to the writer of Psalm 1?

**Commitment to the total demand of the Infinite Silence is her delight.
Responding to this demand her meditation day and night.**

What does this mean? How is the Infinite Silence a total demand which we confront every millisecond of our lives? How is responding to this total demand something we can meditate upon day and night--go to sleep brooding on our appropriate responses, wake up brooding on our appropriate responses, spend the entire day brooding and enacting our appropriate responses? What is this total demand, responding to which makes us happy and not responding to which makes us chaff, without roots, without foundation, without grounding in primal happiness?

The appropriate answer to these questions is not a formula, not an ethical system of correct behaviors. The total demand is the demand to be yourself, to be that integrity of "being yourself" which is deeper than being the self you think you are. Whenever I hear someone say, "I am the sort of person who always _____," I smile. I know that person does not know himself or herself. In order to know oneself in a primal manner, a person would have to say, "I am a person who faces a total demand that I do not understand, that I do not live up to fully, that I have no excuse for not living up to fully, that nevertheless calls me to do what I think I cannot do and to become what I have never been before." If you can say that, you have met yourself at the level of primal integrity.

And the truly happy person is the person who is following this path of total demand and has no other identity than this path. Indeed, on this path I do not have a self I can call my own: I only have a relationship to this all-encompassing calling to become and become and become what I have never been before.

In some types of Buddhism, we find the assertion that the self is an illusion, that there is no "subjective object" down inside my skin. The self, these teachers say, is an abstract notion that we humans have made up to talk about a profound inwardness that is too profound for any image of "my self" to contain. The actual reality of our profound inwardness is not a specific self, but a flux, a continuous process of change. These insights are not inconsistent with what the Psalm writers are indicating about our primal integrity.

I have attempted to resolve some of the confusion in this arena by using two terms: "the ego-self" and "the Spirit-self." By the "ego-self," I mean that network of relationships that I have been building up over my lifetime into my currently existing operating system of habits. This self or personality pattern has reality; but, in a deeper sense, the ego-self is a sort of phantom. It does not represent my full reality. I am an ongoing process of becoming, so my ego has no permanence. Any description I make of my ego-self is just an image that I have invented to describe some passing aspects of that more profound I-dynamic which I am.

The Psalmist of Psalm 1 is describing this more profound I-dynamic. Let us refer to this profound I-dynamic as the Spirit-self. No "I" is more "myself" than "responding to the total demand of the Infinite Silence." Such responding is a perpetual dying to the notion that I am fated to continue being the ego-self I now am. I am in a perpetual process of becoming. I

become and become and become through my own freedom to respond to the total demand of the Infinite Silence. As I walk this path, I need no longer even care who I am, for the question, "Who am I?" has received a lasting answer. I am freedom. I am the Spirit-self perpetually recreating my ego-self. As an ego-self, I am becoming I know not what. And as a Spirit-self, I am paying attention, not to what I, as an ego-I, am becoming, but to that total demand which I, the Spirit-I, am seeking to fulfill, night and day, awake and sleeping, each moment, each month, each year, each decade.

Responding to the total demand of the Infinite Silence and being my own freedom are one and the same thing. My freedom is what the total demand demands of me. There is no handwriting on the sky. The clouds do not spell out "Go plant corn," or anything else. I am on my own to respond to the total demand of the Infinite Silence in being a free response to the total demand of the Infinite Silence. And the Infinite Silence does not speak to me in anxiety relieving human certainties. The Infinite Silence is silent. If the Infinite Silence can be said to speak, perhaps we can imagine the Infinite Silence saying this: "Be a free response to the total demand of the Infinite Silence. Meditate on being this primal integrity day and night, awake and asleep, for your whole life. This is your primal integrity. You have no other life. Every other sense of self is an illusion; it is chaff driven by the wind."

**The Infinite Silence stands guard over the path of responsible living,
but the life styles of the illusion peddlers shall perish.**

Responding to the total demand of the Infinite Silence is the path of freedom. This means creatively living your real life as your real life is being given to you. Any attempt to tell you how you should live your life is a distraction from your living your real life. There can be no detailed prescription. Your religious group cannot tell you. Your Bible cannot tell you. Your government cannot tell you. Your spouse or partner cannot tell you. Your gang cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. You cannot tell you. Only the Infinite Silence can tell you, and the Infinite Silence says nothing. If we wish to use the metaphor of having the Infinite Silence speak, then we have to "hear" the Infinite Silence saying things like this: "Freely respond to the Infinite Silence. This is a total demand and the one demand that will make you happy."

I hope I have now said enough to avoid any confusion that this total demand, of which the Psalmist speaks, can be reduced to a list of specifics. Having clarified that, we must now come full circle and be also clear that we must get specific in our descriptions of our experiences of this total demand. This total demand is not an abstract idea that never touches the ground of specific everyday living. Rather, the total demand is always encountered in specific circumstances and responded to with specific behaviors.

Let me give an extremely simple example. I am 65 years old. The total demand for me includes the demand to be 65 and not pretend to be or behave as if I were 49 or 92. When I go to play basketball with the youth at the gym, I must remember that I am 65 and play within the limitation of my body so that I do not get hurt. At the same time, I can still go to the gym and play basketball: I am not 92. Being obedient to the total demand means being obedient to all my limitations and all my possibilities. Being obedient to all my possibilities is complicated by the fact that I cannot possibly realize all my possibilities. Perhaps I should spend more of my exercise time jogging or gardening rather than playing basketball.

The total demand of the Infinite Silence is encountering each of us in each of our specific situations. Each limitation is an encounter with the Infinite Silence. Each sustaining support for the possibilities of living life is an encounter with the Infinite Silence. Each aspect of our own body, mind, and psyche is an encounter with the Infinite Silence. Each neighboring being is an encounter with the Infinite Silence. Each social whole is an encounter with the Infinite Silence.

Each ecological whole is an encounter with the Infinite Silence. The total demand is the demand to freely respond in affirmation of this total encounter with the Infinite Silence. So, there are always specifics--the specifics of my or your own life--the specifics of all the lives of those around us--the specifics of all the interrelationships with all other humans, all the living beings, and all the inanimate beings in all the networks of interrelationships which are specifically present in the entire cosmos.

The total demand of the Infinite Silence has been and can be expressed in terms of specific laws or rules, but we must be very careful not to reduce our understanding of the total demand to a list of rules or a group of general principles or a set of specific moral laws. When Jesus taught that the Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the Sabbath, he was only teaching good Judaism. Jesus, I am sure, believed that Moses took this view: that the ten commandments (and all the elaborations of the law of Moses) were made to assist human beings to discern and obey the total demand. The Sabbath rule was a great rule. In general terms, it meant embracing the need to set aside time in your seven-day schedule for rest from the rat race of survival and then to use some of that time to celebrate the fundamental truths of your existence. So stated, this rule is quite applicable and wholesomely challenging to each of us. But the rule itself is not to be confused with the total demand. The rule is only a specific rational formulation for carrying out obedience to the total demand. The total demand is greater than any set of rules. And the carrying out of obedience to the total demand entails a freedom that cannot be reduced to an obedience to a set of rules.

Now this response of free affirmation toward the total demand of the Infinite Silence might also be called "love." But if we use this word, "love," we must clarify that we do not mean a human emotion or a human desire. Love, understood as the free affirmation of the total demand of the Infinite Silence, is a love far, far deeper than any feeling or desire. All feelings and desires are affirmed by this deeper love, but this foundational love cannot be identified with these feelings and desires.

We who are students of both Old and New Testament biblical traditions, have heard it said that love is the fulfillment of the law, that the whole law can be summed up as love for God and neighbor. What this actually means is that commandments like "You shall not murder" and "You shall not steal" are ways of being specific about freely loving the total demand of the Infinite Silence. When such commandments are separated from this context, they can become crass ways of protecting the rich from the poor, or moral absolutes of pious nonviolence, or ways of being arrogant toward people in prison, or ways of proving that I and my group are better than other people, or some other unloving idolization of moral certitude. Yet when we actually do freely affirm the total demand of the Infinite Silence, these two commandments, the other eight, and all the specific moral inventions of all the hundreds of years of biblical history can be instructive. Spirit depth can be discovered in the simplest rule if this master context of loving God and neighbor is assumed as the background meaning of that rule. Nevertheless, our primal integrity can never be reduced to obeying rules. Our primal integrity is obeying the total demand to freely affirm every neighbor as a being who is rooted in the Infinite Silence. Our primal integrity is obeying the total demand to freely affirm the Infinite Silence, the source of every neighbor. This free affirmation is the love which is the fulfillment of biblical law. Such love is also being indicated by the writer of Psalm 1 who is defining human happiness as a meditation, day and night, on this total demand.

And this total demand is the only demand that will make you happy. You will be happy, according to Psalm 1, if you freely and affirmatively respond to the Infinite Silence as this never-speaking Silence is speaking to you through encountering you in the specifics of your daily life. The Psalmist of Psalm 1 asks you and me to meditate on responding to this total demand, to

mediate on this demand day and night, awake and asleep, for your whole life.

Are you a man who does this? Are you a woman who does this? Well, happy is such a man:
happy is such a woman.

She is like a tree planted near the water flow,
which yields its fruit in season
and its leaf never withers.
In all that she does, she flourishes.

11. Gratitude for the Love that Endures

Psalm 107

Some of the Psalms plow so deeply into the life of the Spirit that their images become quite cryptic to the literalistic minds of modern people. At a certain depth of Spirit experience, only the wilder images of sheer poetic imagination will do for communicating the experiences being expressed. This is certainly true of Psalm 107. Taken literally, it seems to be a rather weird collection of rescue stories. But if we can let our emotions and Spirit intuitions sink deeper into the drama of this Psalm, we find that it is dealing with subjects that St. John of the Cross called "The Dark Night of the Soul."

If we think of a dark night as an ego-death, then we can see this death as a good experience leading to our rescue by the Infinite Silence not only from a dark night period in our lives, but from that old ego which had to die. So such a dark night period is not a bad thing but a passageway to a deeper experience of being human. And this Psalmist challenges us to be grateful to the Infinite Silence for our dark night passages and for our deliverances.

I see this Psalmist standing on the front of the stage addressing everyone in the auditorium, but looking past the shallow living that we all do much of the time to those deeper matters that we might wish to overlook. The voice tone is up beat and confident even though many of the circumstances referred to are quite sobering.

"It is good to give thanks to the Infinite Silence, . . .
for the care of the Infinite endures for ever." . . .

Let these lines be said by those who have been redeemed by the Infinite Silence,

redeemed by the Infinite from the power of the enemy
and gathered out of every land, . . .
from east and west, . . . from north and south. . . .

I

Some lost their way in desert wastes;
they found no road to a city to live in; . . .
hungry and thirsty,
their spirit sank within them. . . .

So they cried to the Infinite Silence in their trouble . . .
and the Infinite rescued them from their distress; . . .
led them by a straight and easy way
until they came to a city to live in. . . .

Let them thank the Infinite Silence for this enduring care
and for the marvelous things that the Infinite has done for human beings:
satisfied the thirsty, . . .
and filled the hungry with good things. . . .

II

Some sat in darkness, dark as death,
prisoners bound fast in iron, . .
because they had rebelled against the total demand of the Infinite Silence
and flouted the designs of the Infinite. . .

Their spirit was subdued by hard labor;
they stumbled and fell with none to help them. . . .

So they cried to the Infinite Silence in their trouble, . .
and the Infinite saved them from their distress; . .
The Infinite brought them out of darkness, dark as death,
and broke their chains . . .

Let them thank the Infinite Silence for this enduring care
and for the marvelous things that the Infinite has done for human beings:
shattered doors of bronze, . .
bars of iron snapped in two. . . .

III

Some were fools, they took to rebellious ways,
and for their transgression they suffered punishment. . .
They sickened at the sight of food
and drew near to the very gates of death. . . .

So they cried to the Infinite Silence in their trouble,
and the Infinite saved them from their distress; . .
The Infinite Silence spoke a healing word
and brought them alive out of the pit of their corruption. . . .

Let them thank the Infinite Silence for this enduring care
and for the marvelous things that the Infinite has done for human beings:
Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving . . .
and recite the deeds of the Infinite with shouts of joy. . . .

IV

Others there are who go to sea in ships
and make their living on the wide waters. . .
These voyagers have seen the acts of the Infinite Silence
and the Infinite's marvelous doing in the deep. . .
At the Infinite's command, the storm-wind rose
and lifted the waves high.

Carried up to heaven, . . plunged down to the depths, . .
tossed to and fro in peril,
they reeled and staggered like drunks . .
and their seamanship was all in vain. . . .

So they cried to the Infinite Silence in their trouble,
and the Infinite brought them out of their distress. . .

The storm sank to a murmur
and the waves of the sea were stilled. . . .

They were glad then that all was calm, . .
as the Infinite guided them to the harbor they desired. . . .

Let them thank the Infinite Silence for this enduring care
and for the marvelous things that the Infinite has done for human beings:
Let them exalt the Infinite Silence in the assembly of the people
and celebrate the Infinite in the council of the elders. . . .

Conclusion

The Infinite Silence turns rivers into desert . .
and springs of water into thirsty ground; . .
The Infinite turns fruitful land into salt waste, . .
because the human beings who dwell there are so wicked. . . .

Also, the Infinite changes deserts into standing pools, . .
and parched land into springs of water. . .

There the Infinite gives the hungry a home,
and they build themselves a city to live in; . .
they sow fields and plant vineyards
and reap a fruitful harvest. . .

The Infinite blesses them and their numbers increase, . .
and the Infinite does not let their herds lose strength. . . .

Tyrants lose their strength and are brought low
in the grip of misfortune and sorrow; . .
The Infinite brings princes into contempt
and leaves them wandering in a trackless waste. . .

But the Infinite lifts the poor clear of their troubles
and makes families increase like flocks of sheep. . .

The upright see this and are glad, . .
while evildoers are filled with disgust.

Let the wise person lay these things to heart . . .
and ponder the record . . of the enduring care of the Infinite Silence.

The Palmist calmly walks off the stage and leaves the listeners in the great auditorium to ponder these words. The house lights remain on.

Before you think too hard about the exact meanings of this Psalm, simply note which of these rescue stories awaken in you an emotional response. Follow that response to see what parts of your life it leads you to recall. If you succeed in matching part of your life with one or all of these rescue stories, you probably understand this Psalm and need no further reflections from me.

But if we take the images of this Psalm as literal stories that happened to this or that literal person, we gain little from this Psalm and we are driven to ask inappropriate questions like: "Does life always work out so well?" "Are people who cry out to the Infinite always rescued from their times of desert, darkness, nausea, and helplessness?"

So let us assume that these experiences of "desert, darkness, nausea, and helplessness" spoken of by this Psalmist are states of life in our deep interior journeys. If we are able to do this, we may be shocked to realize how well this ancient sage understands our most private experiences.

I

The **desert** means those times when we have lost all the excitement and purpose for living our lives. We seem to have no motivation to get out of bed in the morning and no satisfaction at the end of the day. We are thirsty, hungry for life that is worth living.

It is the Infinite Silence who has brought us to this desert by taking from us whatever it was that used to make our lives exciting. So when we go to the Infinite Silence for help, we go not backwards but forwards into a brand new possibility for living. We are discovering that our sense of desert was not simply a result of external circumstances, but also a result of our interior attachments and aversions. When we go to the Infinite for help, we are leaving behind those attachments and aversions and this very leaving turns out to be a fresh place to live, "a new city to live in" which provides us with plenty of food and drink. When we are relating-to rather than fleeing-from the Infinite, we find the Infinite Silence is quite resourceful with nourishing experiences. The Infinite is always a healing and nurturing relationship because the Infinite is always flowing with possibilities we have never even considered.

II

The **darkness** means those times when we have lost all meaning and understanding of what is going on in our lives. We are in the dark. Perhaps our old philosophy of life has ceased to be an overview in which we can actually believe. Perhaps some wisdom we were relying on became for us sheer stupidity. Perhaps our ways of thinking simply became obsolete, and thus we find that no one is using our ways of thinking anymore.

When in this distress of darkness we cry out to the Infinite, we are making a magnificent step in self knowledge. We are moving into the realization that all our scientific knowledge, all our religious doctrines, all our ethical wisdoms are inventions of a finite mind and therefore laced with darkness. Darkness is our natural state. Darkness is an experience of the Infinite. This experience, according to the Psalmist is like having bronze doors shattered and bars of iron broken in two. We are let out of prison, the prison of our finite wisdoms and allowed to walk free in the darkness of the Infinite, which darkness is also the place from which new and better wisdoms arise.

III

In the third rescue story, we hear about those who sickened at the sight of food. This **nausea** has to do with a loss of righteousness. Life has become unpalatable, sickening. We have lost our appetite for living. We can't stomach our lives anymore.

So we cry out to the Infinite again, and this time we hear a healing word and end up offering sacrifices of thanksgiving and reciting the deeds of the Infinite with shouts of joy. Clearly, the Infinite relationship offers us a fresh start no matter how messed up the record of our lives has become. Our nausea over our filthiness becomes, in the light of our experience of the Infinite, a step toward a fresh start--finding a righteousness that is not of our own making.

IV

The last rescue story has to do with seamen who sail out on the deep waters and there they experience complete **helplessness** in the mighty storms that rage in this undiluted reality. What a powerful image: being on a ship that is carried up to the sky and plunged down to the depths, a time in which we are completely out of control and in the hands of huge perilous powers. Even if we have never seen the ocean, we may have experienced moments of such total helplessness.

And when these helpless voyagers cry out to the Infinite in their distress they find that all is calm and that they are guided to a harbor of safety. Again, the secret to understanding this speedy rescue is realizing that we are all, always, totally helpless in the hands of the Infinite. Total helplessness is simply our experience of the Infinite. So when we cry out to the Infinite, we find harbor in the Infinite. The Infinite relationship is Eternally there and that is our calmness. All is still. We are home. We can now celebrate the Infinite rather than wallow in our own helplessness.

In the concluding verses, this Psalmist muses over the surprising qualities of Infinite action. No tyrant is secure. No poor person is without possibility. The Infinite can do and does do the seemingly impossible.

Let the wise person lay these things to heart
and ponder the record of the enduring care of the Infinite Silence.

12. Shouting into the Infinite Silence

Psalm 150

I want to end my selection of Psalms with the last Psalm in the Psalter. This Psalm was clearly selected to be last because of its loud, ringing quality. I find it a powerful and fitting conclusion to that ancient collection of poems for worshipping the Infinite Silence.

In my rewording of it, I have chosen to use the term “celebrate” rather than the term “praise.” The English word “praise” has slipped away somewhat from the meaning intended in this Psalm. When we praise someone for their good qualities or their fine work we tend to be setting ourselves up as the one who knows what is praiseworthy. We tend to assume that we are giving something to the praised one that the praised one deserves and perhaps needs as an encouragement to further effective living. These meanings do not apply to our relationship with the Infinite.

Further, the use of the term “praise” in the worship services of our more conservative religious bodies has a pious tone which carries this hidden and idolatrous meaning: “Praise be unto us for inventing and believing in our doctrine of divinity.”

The Infinite Silence is not a doctrine of divinity but an experience of actuality. The Infinite Silence does not need our praise. The Infinite is the Infinite and thus has no needs whatsoever. It is we who need to extol, hail, honor, celebrate the Infinite, for not to do so means that we are fleeing from our actual lives, lives that have been brought to be and are sustained by this Infinite Source of all actuality. So the Psalmist is speaking to us, to all of us, and is asking us to extol, hail, honor, celebrate this Source of all actuality. For this means to also celebrate our lives and all existing reality; to celebrate what actually is; to celebrate our lives as a relationship with the Infinite; to celebrate the Infinite; to celebrate all the wondrous works of the Infinite that surround and constitute our lives.

Using the term “celebrate” in this manner, may also assist us to purify our celebrations. Too often our celebrations are escapes from life rather than taking time to energize the highs and lows, the comings and goings of our lives. Do we not sometimes genuinely celebrate our birthdays? Have we not at times genuinely celebrated the completed life of someone we treasured? Is it possible that all our attempts to hold gatherings to worship the Infinite Silence could be honestly called “celebrations.”

For this Psalm, both the house lights of the auditorium and the stage lights are in full illumination. The Psalmist stands in the middle of the stage and addresses the entire auditorium. The voice tone is commanding in a clear and ringing voice. The volume of the reading begins very loud and remains so until the end of the Psalm.

O celebrate the Infinite Silence.

long pause

O celebrate the trustworthy mysteriousness of the Infinite Silence. . . .

Celebrate the Infinite manifest in the vault of the sky,
the vault of Infinite power. . . .

Celebrate the Infinite for mighty works. . . .

Celebrate the Infinite for immeasurable greatness. . . .

Celebrate the Infinite with fanfares on the trumpet,
Celebrate the Infinite upon lute and harp;
Celebrate the Infinite with tambourines and dancing,
Celebrate the Infinite with flute and strings;
Celebrate the Infinite with clash of cymbals,
Celebrate the Infinite with triumphant cymbals; . .

Let everything that has breath, . . celebrate the Infinite Silence!

long pause

O Celebrate the Infinite Silence.

In the profound Silence that follows this loud Psalm, the Psalmist simply stands motionless in the center of the stage. After several minutes the Psalmist leaves the stage and the auditorium also empties as everyone returns to their ordinary lives. With this noisy Infinite Silence still ringing in their ears, they begin talking to each other. Some dance. Some sing. Life goes on in all its variety.

The Infinite Silence Walks Among Us

Dialogues with the Gospel of John

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Preface

My aim in this book is to translate into more accessible language the widely misunderstood metaphors of the gospel of John. This book is a sequel to my book on the stories of Genesis, *The Infinite Silence Speaks*. It is also a sequel to my book on the Psalms, *Speaking Back to the Infinite Silence*. This book has emerged from my desire to write a book on the New Testament that employs the momentum I built up in these earlier books for this term “The Infinite Silence.”

By “momentum” I mean to indicate that a poetic phrase like “The Infinite Silence” can build up poetic power as it is used more and more in connection with real life experiences. I have attempted to accomplish that in my two books on the Old Testament.

The “God” Reference

Using the term “God” in contemporary Christian theology is fraught with many dangers of mis-communication. The vast majority of Christians today use the term “God” to mean “a literal Supreme Being living in some non-material realm.” Another swath of Christians use the term “God” to mean “a superlative idea that makes sense of everything.” Both of these usages are disastrous for accurate biblical interpretation.

I am reluctant to give up using the term “God” altogether for the same reason that I am reluctant to give up terms like “sin” and “grace” and “freedom” and “love” and “faith.” All these terms and others are rooted in centuries of exploration and have thus accumulated poetic power in the depths of our lives as well as numerous misunderstandings.

I have found one way to retain the poetic power of the word “God” without falling into the yawning pits of misunderstanding. If we connect the word “God” to the pronoun “my,” the useful phrase “my God” is constructed. This term can be defined to mean “my central life meaning and loyalty and joy.” So defined all these statements can be meaningful statements: “My God is Sexual Pleasure.” “My God is Technological Civilization.” Or “My God is the Infinite Silence.”

Just as the word “sweetheart” is a relational word meaning the one with whom I wish to establish an emotional or sexual relationship, so the term “God” is often used in the Bible as a relational word. The term “God” is also used in the Bible to point to that Otherness with whom this relationship of “my God” is being forged. But this is the place where trouble begins in contemporary biblical interpretation. What is that Otherness to which the term “God” points? If we do not answer that question with pristine clarity, the whole of Christian theology disintegrates into utterly meaningless drivel.

So I am hoping that in my books, *The Infinite Silence Speaks* and *Speaking Back to the Infinite Silence*, I have built up some momentum of clarity about the Otherness the Bible is pointing to with the word “God.”

How is the New Testament New?

Many Christian thinkers have claimed that the New Testament meaning of “God” is quite different from the Old Testament meaning of “God.” But such claims are exceedingly misleading. Jesus and his followers worshiped the very same God as Moses and his followers. The sayings of Jesus and the writings of his early followers only make deep and appropriate sense when the Mosaic and prophetic heritage about God is kept in mind. It is not a fluke that the New Testament community retained the Old Testament as part of their scriptures.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are so embedded in Old Testament imagery that they cannot be properly understood without that grounding. The New Testament writings are

new in the sense that they are forging a new or renewed covenant with the very same God. This new illumination reshaped the future of their religious reflection. And it also reshaped the way they understood their still meaningful past of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and the Prophets, the Psalms, and so on. The earliest Jewish “Christians” did not even see themselves as ceasing to be Jews, but rather as having become true Jews. In their minds, Moses and the Prophets had shaken hands with Jesus and joined him in their interior council of saintly figures.

So as you read my reflections on the New Testament, I want you to test out the proposition that the New Testament authors, Jesus, Moses, the prophets, the Psalm writers, and all the other Old Testament writers and seers worshiped the very same God. They all found their meaning, loyalty and joy in their relationship to the very same Otherness. And I want you to continue testing out my suggestion that this worshiped Otherness can be meaningfully approached through this metaphor: the Infinite Silence.

Why John?

In contemplating the writing of this book, I puzzled for a while over which New Testament writings to explore. I am deeply tuned to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and also to the letters of Paul. I considered working with selections from all these writings. But I have decided to focus on the Gospel of John. I have decided this because I feel that our confusion is greatest in our attempts to fathom this Gospel.

Many Christians who call themselves “conservative” have used the Gospel of John as a support for what I call their “Christian bigotry.” And many liberal Christians have dismissed the Gospel of John because it contains so little of the actual teachings of the historical Jesus.

I agree with what our liberal scholars say about the teachings of the historical Jesus. The Gospel of John may not contain a single word that Jesus actually said in his earthly life. And the author of this gospel was clearly not the apostle John, but some religious luminary who lived near the turn into the second century. Furthermore, the quality of this Gospel is very different from the other three. The Gospel of John is like an elaborate morality play. It is more clearly understood if you can visualize the various characters in this long oral reading coming on and off a stage. As they appear on the stage, they have signs hanging around their necks--like: “Mother of Jesus,” or “Light of the World,” or “Man born Blind,” or “Religious Authorities,” or “Bewildered Disciples.” The whole drama has a certain amount of pomp and humor about it. It pokes fun at this; it satirizes that; it blasts away at some error; it elaborates some breakthrough. It is truly a preposterous and wonderful piece of writing.

But in the hands of literalistic Christian interpreters, the Gospel of John has been the most misleading book in the whole canon. So, if my efforts can help to rescue this wonderful document from the swamp of misunderstanding and give you a glimpse into its religious relevance, perhaps this will assist in reclaiming the entire New Testament as food for the soul, not for Christians only, but for every person of whatever religious background who is seeking food.

1. The Ultimate Message

John 1:1-18

I will begin by translating into more accessible language the widely misunderstood metaphors of the first chapter of the gospel of John. Listen to this as if you have never heard these words before. Listen as if you are indeed hearing them for the first time.

When all finite things began, the Ultimate Message already was. The Ultimate Message dwelt with the Infinite Silence and what the Infinite Silence was the Ultimate Message was. The Ultimate Message, then, was with the Infinite Silence at the beginning, and through that Message all things came to be; no single finite thing came into being without that Message. And all that came to be was alive with the Life of the Ultimate Message, and that Life was the Light for all humanity. That Light still shines on in the darkness: the darkness has never overcome it.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel is not saying that some human person, Jesus, existed before the big bang. No, the gospel writer is speaking of cosmic realities. The Ultimate Message is a cosmic reality like gravity, indeed more basic than gravity. Before gravity existed, the Ultimate Message already was. The Ultimate Message assisted in the creation of gravity. When the Infinite Silence sent gravity emerging from the Black Abyss of nothingness, the Ultimate Message was already in operation. I am not making this up. While the writer of the fourth gospel had a different concept of gravity than I do, gravity is a finite thing for both of us. The passage above clearly says that no finite thing came to be without the Ultimate Message. The Infinite Silence and the Ultimate Message are two aspects of the same Infinity.

Now, there is some deep mythology going on here. We are not talking about something strictly literal. The gospel writer is not saying that the words of the Christian Bible predated the big bang. The words of the Bible are not synonymous with this cosmic "Word." The Bible is finite. This Ultimate Message is Infinite. Hebrew and Greek are finite languages created by finite human beings. This cosmic Word is not created by human beings. This should be obvious. How can we be so dumb as to get this mixed up?

And the Ultimate Message is not Christianity. The Ultimate Message predates Christianity by at least 15 billion years. And if we welcome this Ultimate Message as the meaning and allegiance of our lives, we do not thereby become a Christian. We become something far more wonderful than that. We become an Offspring of the Infinite Silence. Do we think that there are no Hindus who are Offspring of the Infinite Silence? Do we think that there are no Buddhists who are Offspring of the Infinite Silence? Do we think that there are no Jews who are Offspring of the Infinite Silence? Do we think that there are no atheists who are Offspring of the Infinite Silence? Well, if we do, why do we think that? Because we are Christian bigots! Because we confuse being Offspring of the Infinite Silence with being members of some Christian group!

Let's read on beginning with the 10th verse of the gospel of John:

The Ultimate Message, then, was in the world; but the world, though it owed its being to the Ultimate Message, did not recognize the Ultimate Message. The Ultimate Message entered its own home realm, but that home realm did not welcome the Ultimate Message

But, to all who did welcome the Ultimate Message, to those who yielded to the Ultimate

Message their allegiance, the Ultimate Message gave the right to become Offspring of the Infinite Silence, not born of any human stock, or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the Offspring of the Infinite Silence.

(In other words, all of us who welcome that Ultimate Message become “virgin born”-- not born of any human stock, but Offspring of the Infinite Silence!)

Dare we read further?

So the Ultimate Message became our human flesh; the Ultimate Message came to dwell in humanity, and we saw the Awe of the Ultimate Message, the glorious Awe that befits the only true Offspring of the Infinite Silence--full of healing effectiveness and illumination for our whole lives.

Out of the full store of the Ultimate Message we have all received healing on top of healing; for while the Total Demand of the Infinite Silence was revealed to us through Moses, healing and illumination came to us through Jesus, the Ultimate Message of the Infinite Silence. No one has ever seen the Infinite Silence (including Jesus of Nazareth as well as each of us); but the only Offspring of the Infinite Silence, who is nearest to the heart of the Infinite Silence, has made the Infinite Silence known to us.

Now just what was it that was made known to us? The entire gospel of John was written to clarify that, but we might summarize the Ultimate Message with this single phrase: “The Infinite Silence loves us.”

And what does that mean? It means that the Infinite Silence, in spite of all our “darkness,” welcomes us home to the “Light” of our authentic life of Awe in the presence of the Infinite Silence. “Darkness” is that with which we have attempted to extinguish this “Light” that our finite, limited, actual, fleshly, down-to-Earth human existence is good, good for us, is indeed already filled with the goodness of the only Awe-filling Aliveness we need. Our actual essential humanity--which all of us still have in spite of all of the damage we have done to it--is life and life abundant. This is the illumination brought by the Ultimate Message; the Truth that was always true, is now true, and ever shall be true. This Truth makes only one demand upon us--that we welcome it as the truth. From this welcome of the Ultimate Message will follow all the healing needed in the human relationship with the Infinite Silence. All despair over being an Awe-filled relationship to the Infinite Silence will pass away. In its place will grow seedlings and perhaps giant trees of freedom, trust, compassion, and tranquility. In our own flesh, a life will emerge that is not intimidated by death, suffering, limitations, or responsibilities for the destiny of this entire planet. Yet this new life is just our old, old, old life. This new life is none other than human authenticity itself, the life that the myth of Eden says was lost from eating the wrong food. This new (yet very old) life feeds on this newly recovered food: the Ultimate Message which walked among us, was broken for us, bled for us, entered the tomb for us, in order that we might live that same quality of life, that abundant life which no tomb, no suffering, no events whatsoever can intimidate.

So Jesus communicated to us the Ultimate Message. Jesus was just a human being, no different from you or me. He may have been a little smarter than you or I, a little less insane than you are or I am; he was certainly less swamped by despair. But in spite of whatever finite differences there are between you and me and Jesus, we are the very same humanity. And this wholly human person, Jesus, communicated to us the Ultimate Message. We might say that Jesus was that Ultimate Message, and therein is the primal paradox of Christian witnessing: (1) Jesus was just Jesus and (2) Jesus was the Ultimate Message. But this does not place Jesus on

some unapproachable pedestal, because John is saying that you, too, can become the Ultimate Message. You, too, can be just you and, at the same time, be the Ultimate Message. If you welcome the Ultimate Message, if you yield your allegiance to the Ultimate Message, the Ultimate Message gives you the right to become the Ultimate Message: yes, to become the Offspring of the Infinite Silence, not born of any human stock, nor by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the Offspring of the Infinite Silence. These phrases were not referring to Jesus only. They were said about those who welcomed the Ultimate Message that the Infinite Silence loved them. They were said, perhaps, about you. You can be the “virgin born” Offspring of the Infinite Silence. If you do not understand how you can be the Ultimate Message, then you do not understand what it means to say that Jesus was the Ultimate Message.

Let us assume that the author of the Fourth Gospel knew, in his or her own experience, that each of us become the Ultimate Message when the Ultimate Message is communicated to us. And by “communicated” is meant having the ears to hear it, the eyes to see it, the stomach to stomach it. The world at large rejected it and still rejects it. And this rejecting is the “darkness” of which the gospel writer speaks. The Ultimate Message was laid out plainly and people said, “HUH UH! that can’t be the Ultimate Message. I was looking for something else.”

Well, what is that something else that most of us are still looking for? A trip out of this messy world to a better world. A trip out of my messy body into a better body. A trip out of this messy life to a better life. A trip out of limitation into an unlimited life. A trip out of responsibility into a spontaneous life. A trip away from having my foolishness humiliated by reality into a life where everyone respects me and tells me I am a wonderful person.

The Ultimate Message offers us no trips to these “so-called” better places. The Ultimate Message offers us abundant life, here and now, in exactly the place where we are and from which there is no escape. The Ultimate Message offers us welcome to our true home which was never far away. Our own authentic life filled with the Awe of the Infinite Silence is our home. In this home, we are Sons and Daughters. We are loved by the Infinite. When we accept that, we are home.

And this acceptance into our “true home” is the Ultimate Message. Accepting this Message does not make you a Christian, it makes you a Son or Daughter of the Infinite Silence. A Hindu can accept the Ultimate Message and go on being a Hindu. A Jew can accept the Ultimate Message and go on being a Jew. Yes, even an atheist can accept the Ultimate Message and go on **not** believing in most of what people mean by the word “God.” The Ultimate Message is not the message of any particular religion. It is a cosmic message. It is like gravity. It is more basic than gravity. Yes, Jesus was the Ultimate Message, and Jesus enables us to nail down what we are talking about. But Jesus was not a Christian. He was a Jew. And he did not ask us to become Jews or Christians. He asked us to become Offspring of the Infinite Silence.

Various Christian religions have tried in their various ways to communicate the Ultimate Message which Jesus was. They have succeeded and they have failed. They have healed lives and they have made lives sicker. In recent decades, most Christian groups have become profoundly confused about the meaning of this Ultimate Message.

One of the deepest of all those confusions is thinking that accepting Christian teachings and joining Christian groups is the same thing as hearing and living the Ultimate Message.

So what is the Ultimate Message? The Infinite Silence loves you. No matter what religion you belong to. No matter what doctrines you believe, try to believe, or can’t believe. No matter what petty moralities you attempt to keep or refuse to keep. The Infinite Silence loves you. That’s it.

But here is the hitch: each of us, you and I, must consider whether or not we understand what it means to say that the Infinite Silence loves you or loves me. Do you know in your own experience what is meant by the Infinite Silence? Do you know in an experiential manner what it means to say that the Infinite Silence loves you? Do you even know who “you” are in the Spirit depths of your actuality? If the answer to any of these questions is “No,” then you live in “darkness.”

To the extent that you or I must answer any of these questions in the negative, we live in “darkness,” but this “darkness” in which we live has not overcome the “Light” of the Ultimate Message. If you feel that this “Light” has not yet dawned for you, perhaps it will do so very soon.

If we do not trust the Ultimate Message, then we live in mistrust of the Infinite Silence. This is an “either-or” dynamic: either we trust or we mistrust. This either/or dynamic is modified somewhat by this also true dynamic: the more we trust, the deeper we see into our mistrust. The more we see the light, the more of our remaining darkness is illuminated. But it is still true that in each moment of self-aware existence one basic choice confronts us: do we trust the Infinite Silence or do we mistrust the Infinite Silence. So as you read the following discourses on the gospel of John, I want you to keep asking yourselves this one question: do I trust or mistrust the Ultimate Message that the Infinite Silence loves me.

2. Born of the Wind

John 3:1-21

There was a teacher of religion named Nicodemus, a member of the council of theologians, who came to Jesus by night. “Rabbi,” he said, “we know that you are a teacher sent by the Infinite Silence, for no one can perform the wonders you do unless the Infinite Silence is supporting him.”

Jesus answered, “In truth, in complete truth, I tell you, unless a person has been born over again he cannot even perceive the community of the Infinite Silence.”

“But how is it possible,” said Nicodemus, “for a person to be born when already old? Can one enter one’s mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Truthfully I tell you, no one can enter the community of the Infinite Silence without being born through a deep washing and an actual breakloose of Infinite Awe. The finite can give birth only to the finite; it is Infinite Awe that gives birth to Infinite Awe. So you ought not to be astonished, then, when I tell you that you must be born over again. The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Infinite Wind.”

Nicodemus replied, “How is this possible?”

“What!” said Jesus. “Is this famous teacher of Israel ignorant of such things? In complete truth, I tell you, we speak of what we know, and testify to what we have seen, and yet you religious teachers reject our testimony. If you disbelieve me when I talk to you about common everyday experiences, how will you believe me if I should talk about the really deep matters of the Infinite relationship?”

In this dialogue, Nicodemus is the person who does not think from his own experience, his own experience of Awe. Nicodemus is a caricature of every religious person and religious teacher who wants religion to be a matter of literal statements, objective truths, or arm’s-length dogmas. If you have ever tried to share something Awesome with someone who could not or would not feel the Awe and kept flipping off into rational misunderstandings about what you were saying, you have met Nicodemus. Nicodemus is more than a straight man in the drama of the Fourth Gospel; Nicodemus is an archetype of that person who has turned religious symbols into literal nonsense. Nicodemus is an embarrassing portrait of about 95% of the teachers of Christianity in our own day.

“What!” said Jesus. “You, a religious teacher do not understand the basic factor in all religious experience?” What is that basic factor? Let’s call it Awe. Let’s call it “the Infinite Wind.” If we call it “Spirit” nothing is clarified until we say what “Spirit” is. It does not matter what we call it, unless we are pointing with our term to an actual experience in human life. So what is Spirit? This question cannot be answered to someone who has not experienced Spirit. To experience Spirit you must be born again. If you are dealing only with your thoughts, your feelings or your choices of action, you are dealing with the finite level of human living; you are not dealing with Spirit. Spirit is a relationship with the Infinite. But what does that mean? Again, you cannot know unless you have been born into your own most personal relationship with the Infinite. So what does it mean to be born of Spirit?

I will offer some very elemental examples, some experiences of Awe which a large number of us have experienced. Perhaps you have lain on a cot some night out under the stars and as

you look up into that vastness, you find yourself gripping the edges of the cot. "Time is so vast," you say, "There was a time when I was not here and a time, soon to come, when I will not be here. Yet these stars will burn for many millions of years. This Earth will turn on its axis and swing round the sun long after I am gone." These thoughts somehow break through the routine, practical surface of your living and strong feelings begin to awaken. "Being here at all is really weird," you say. "Not being here some day is also weird and a bit scary and very mysterious and I don't know how to say it--it simply gets my attention. I am such a small blip on the sweep of time." And these phrases are not said with cynical arm's-length objectiveness: you feel them. You feel the sadness, the dread, the vulnerability, the excitement of being alive, the wonder over the fact that what is so is actually so, and perhaps the shock of how deeply ignorant about life and death we all are. Perhaps you resolve, gripping your cot that night under the vast sky, to be more honest about what you experience and the fact that you experience it. Whenever this sort of experience is happening to you, you are experiencing Spirit, a little fragment of Spirit. The Infinite Wind is blowing through your life. And this Infinite Wind is simply the awareness that you are a self-aware relationship with the Infinite Source of your life and with the Infinite Tomb into which your life will return. "The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Infinite Wind."

So let us assume that what I have described is a small part of that elemental matter about which Jesus is chiding Nicodemus, the religious teacher who does not understand what religion is all about. Now, let us hear some more, if we have the ears to hear it, about those deeper matters which the writer of the gospel of John thinks Nicodemus needs to explore.

"No one ever traveled to the really deep matters of the Infinite relationship except someone whose existence came from those very depths. The home of a prophetic personage is those depths. The prophetic personage standing before you must be lifted up as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, so that everyone who trusts this messenger may join him in the actualization of that quality of life that knows no ending."

We have here an allusion to Jesus' crucifixion. And the gospel writer implies that this "lifting up" is somehow related to Nicodemus' need for a new birth. At this point, the words of the gospel writer's fictitious Jesus figure blend off into the words of the gospel writer herself. (We do not really know the sex of this gospel writer. John, remember, is a pseudonym). Apparently, the gospel writer so completely identified with her fictitious Jesus that it seems perfectly natural to place herself in the role of being the Ultimate Message talking about the Ultimate Message who is now both herself and Jesus.

"The Infinite Silence so loved the blind world of humanity that the Infinite Silence sacrificed this Singular Offspring, so that everyone who trusts in this Offspring may not be subject to death but join this Offspring in that quality of life that does not die. It was not to condemn the blind world of humanity that the Infinite Silence sent this Offspring into that world, but that through this Offspring the blind world might be healed of its blindness.

"The person who puts his or her trust in the Offspring of the Infinite Silence does not come under condemnation, but the person who does not trust this Offspring has already been condemned in that he or she has not given allegiance to the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. Herein lies the test: the light has come into the world, but humanity preferred darkness to light because their deeds were off-the-mark. Such off-the-mark humans all hate the light and avoid it, for fear that their practices will be shown up. The honest, authentic, on-the-mark person comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that genuine Awe before the Infinite Silence is being reflected in all that he or she does."

Now I hope my rephrasing of these key phrases in the gospel of John has raised some questions. Apparently, this gospel writer intended these phrases to be somewhat cryptic. He or she intended for the reader to realize that a new birth was required to understand what the words of this gospel were pointing to. So I am asking all you Christian dogma believers who think that you understand these all too familiar words to look again at these phrases.

And speaking to those of you who are rejecting Christianity, let me confess to you that I see clearly that Christianity has been turned into magical nonsense by those who preach that merely believing Christian dogmas will do something meaningful for us. Can we actually accept the notion that believing that "Jesus is the Son of God." or "Jesus died for our sins." will assure such a believer of an escape from death or hell or in any way make a meaningful difference in that person's destiny or quality of life? Surely, it is simply not true that believing dogmatic statements does anything whatsoever for the believer of such mere words. To understand what it means to believe the Ultimate Message, "You must be born again," says this cryptic gospel writer. And I submit that most so-called "born again" Christians do not have the foggiest idea what this gospel writer was pointing to with this phrase "born again."

So let us slow down, read these phrases very slowly, and ask some really basic questions--questions we all have, if we are honest: (1) What is this "born again" stuff all about? (2) What does the crucifixion of an innocent man in the first century have to do with this new birth? (3) What does it mean to trust the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence? And (4) what is this new life we are going to experience if we are indeed born again?

1. Born again?

I have already suggested that being born again has to do with experiencing Awe, and that your Awe experiences might include experiencing the mystery and wonder of your own unavoidable death and your own unlikely life. But we must say more than this: the author of the Fourth Gospel wants us to consider a new birth that has to do with a transformation in our basic attitude toward all Awe experiences. Instead of fleeing away from the truth of our Awe-filled lives and thus blinding ourselves to our Spirit actuality, we are being asked to be born anew into a life that allows Spirit to be the main subject of our lives--which it already is. Spirit is and always was the very essence of every human life. No one can be born of Spirit who is not already a Spirit being. The blindness or darkness of this world of humanity came to be because we denied being the Spirit beings we are. Indeed many, perhaps most, human beings are at the present moment denying their Spirit beings so thoroughly that they have forgotten that they are Spirit beings and, furthermore, see no use in remembering.

Many of us avoid experiencing the full extent of this blindness by redefining "spirit" in such a way that it is not quite so absent from our lives. We define "spirit" as some sort of intellectual activity. We define "spirit" as some sort of emotional piosity. We define "spirit" as some sort of community esprit de corps. We define "spirit" as some sort of moral behavior. None of these things are, in and of themselves, filled with the dread and fascination and intensity of awareness I am pointing to with this word "Awe." Awe breaks through our ordinary finite thoughts in Great Thinks that transport us into a living relationship with the Infinite. Awe breaks through our ordinary finite feelings in Great Feels that transport us into a living relationship with the Infinite. Awe breaks through our ordinary finite moralities in Great Resolves that transport us into a living, active relationship with the Infinite.

If we are to understand this new birth envisioned in the Fourth Gospel, we must explore the Awe-dimension of our human existence.

2. The new birth and the crucifixion of an innocent person

Jesus' crucifixion is an important part of this gospel writer's imagination. To understand why this is so, we must remember the cosmic context that was established in the first chapter. Jesus is not just Jesus, a particular human being. Jesus is also the Ultimate Message of the Infinite Silence. And it is being this Ultimate Message that makes Jesus the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. Furthermore, you and I can also, through our new birth, become part of this Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. We can become what we already are in our essence: sons and daughters of the Infinite Silence. And our Sonhood or Daughterhood is not different from the Sonhood of Jesus. Our Offspringhood is exactly the same as his Offspringhood.

Furthermore, Jesus' suffering and death at the hands of the blind world is exactly the same thing as our own suffering and death at the hands of the blind world if we are meeting that suffering and death because we are actually living our own "new birth" and actually challenging the blind world to be rescued from its blindness. In other words, "the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence" is not just Jesus but any human being who is "in Jesus," that is, "in the new birth" which Jesus manifests and makes possible for others to manifest.

One implication of these comments is that being a member of a Christian group is in no way synonymous with being a member of this "Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence." A Hindu or a Buddhist or a Moslem or an atheist might be a member of this "Singular Offspringhood" if that person is indeed manifesting the new birth we are talking about. No religious membership or religious beliefs are essential to being the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. One thing is essential: a Spirit rebirth.

Now what does the suffering and/or death of the Singular Offspring have to do with our Spirit birth? An illuminated person coming into our living space and confronting our inauthenticity (our blindness) is the key factor in our overcoming that blindness and becoming illuminated ourselves. The dynamic through which illumination happens is the suffering of the illuminated person at the hands of the blind person. That a blind person is loved by the Infinite Silence is demonstrated by the living fact that the blind person is not left in blindness but is approached by the illuminated person. Furthermore, the blind person will, in the first instance, reject the illuminated person and thus inflict some sort of suffering. Why? Because to accept the illuminated person as illuminated means that the blind person must admit to being blind. In the struggle not to have to admit this blindness, the blind person inflicts suffering upon the illuminated person. But this very dynamic manifests the central truth that the illuminated person is there to communicate: namely that the Infinite Silence loves the inauthentic or blind person in spite of all blindness and is working in all things to bring illumination or Spirit rebirth.

Why must new birth for the blind ones come through the suffering of the illuminated ones? There is no answer to this question except simply to say that this is the way life works. The Infinite Silence has ordained this sacrificial dynamic to be the way life works. The Infinite Silence sacrifices the beloved Offspring of the Infinite Silence in order to declare the love of the Infinite Silence to the blind world. If I am reborn and thus a person manifesting the Spirit life and calling others to participate in their essential Spirithood, then I am going to suffer, perhaps even be killed, at the hands of the blind I am attempting to awaken. Blessed are you, says Jesus in another gospel, when humanity mistreats you, it is a sign that you are (or may be) part of the Spirit community of the Infinite Silence.

There is no Spirit healing without trust in the forgiveness of the Infinite Silence. The suffering of the authentic at the hands of the inauthentic proclaims that forgiveness. The bringer of the Truth does not come as a tyrant who forces the Truth upon us, but as a suffering servant who risks himself or herself to challenge our blindness and declare to us our forgiveness. And by "forgiveness" we do not mean any sort of indulging of us in continuing our inauthenticity.

“Forgiveness” means our welcome home to our authenticity. And such forgiveness is an ongoing dynamic built into the very essence of the cosmos, a dynamic more basic than gravity. This is clearly an element of the Ultimate Message: before gravity existed, forgiveness IS.

Similarly, part of the elemental fabric of the entire cosmos is this grim dynamic: our blindness, our inauthenticity causes suffering to other people, to other living beings, and especially to the illuminated ones who come to us with the Truth about our blindness.

3. Trusting the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence

So what does trusting the Singular Offspring look like? If we have been blind and now make the turn from crucifying the illuminated ones in our lives, what does trusting them look like? It means being willing to walk a hundred miles to have another aspect of your blindness exposed and another aspect of your authenticity released. It means running toward every person who manifests illumination rather than running away from them, rejecting them, perhaps harming them. The blind feel they have no need to read another book, attend another course, hear another talk, experience another teacher. The awake are those who trust themselves to the ongoing healing of their lives through every resource available. Such behavior is called trusting Jesus, for Jesus, remember, is not just a singular life lived long ago. Jesus is the Ultimate Message. Jesus is the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. Every resource which illuminates our blindness and releases our authenticity is “Jesus,” the living Jesus who is the Ultimate Message. So if some person who calls himself an atheist is illuminating your life, that person is Jesus. If some person who calls herself a Buddhist is illuminating your life, that person is Jesus. If some person who calls himself a Christian is illuminating your life, that person is Jesus. We are exploring a universal dynamic of life, not the prerogatives of some ecclesiastical hierarchy.

So let us examine even more carefully what happens when you or I, as a blind person, confront the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. We are blind, remember, so we do not know what seeing is. We are living in darkness, so we do not have a clue about what it would mean to live in the light. Someone who sees the light, who knows the truth about life and thus about your life or my life must come and tell us, show us, enable us to see. The truth comes to us from the outside. Why? Because our inside is in darkness. We are blind, remember. Now what are we blind to? We are blind to our blindness and to what seeing would be like. We are spiritually blind. And this means that we are in despair over our actual lives. We are in despair over our actual lives because we are fleeing from our actual lives into blindness. We do not want to see, because to see would mean to admit that we are blind. Of course the moment we can admit that we are blind, we see. We really see that we have been blind all our lives. We also see that we are welcomed home to the light of our own lives, to the Awe of our own lives, to the relationship to the Infinite that constitutes our own lives. And we also see that we must now choose to see if we want to continue seeing.

So this is the healing that the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence brings: (1) clarity on our blindness, (2) knowledge of our forgiveness, and (3) the invitation to live our real lives, lives filled with Awe, lives constituted in an Offspring-relationship to the Infinite Silence who has always and will always love us.

So trusting Jesus--trusting the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence--means (1) taking in the illuminating message that exposes our blindness and thus confessing that we have been blind, (2) noticing that it is simply true that we are being welcomed home to reality, and (3) accepting the invitation to live our real lives as they actually are.

Perhaps a homely example would help to further clarify these universally operative dynamics. Let us imagine a man who believed that being a “real man” and being “in control”

were one and the same thing. Picture this man as persistent in being “in control” of how his adolescent and college-age children shaped their lives. He had for his whole married life also been insistent on being “in control” of how his wife lived her life. Only once, or perhaps twice, had he been violent with his wife, but it was enough to make clear that threatening his control was not going to be accepted. Similarly, the children knew that any challenge to his basic intents for their lives would result in unacceptable consequences, loss of money, loss of privileges. The man was fairly wise and admirable in other ways, so, for the most part, the wife and children toed the line where it mattered to him, or kept their little rebellions secret. Then crises began to come. As we look at it from the outside, we can see that this was inevitable, for no human being is actually in control of the people around him, or of the world at large, or even of every aspect of his own personal life. Being in control and being a finite being are mutually exclusive conditions.

But this man, living in his own most cherished illusion, did not realize that he was doing anything wrong or unrealistic, he was, in his own mind, just being a “real man.” He saw himself as being a firm husband and father who wished only the best for those in his “charge.” Then these things began to happen to this man. One of his sons decided to drop out of college and become an auto mechanic. One of his daughters announced that she was a lesbian and had begun living with a woman partner. His wife had read one more book on liberal religion and had decided to leave the church to which his family had always belonged. These details could have been different, but the meaning of these events for this man was that he was losing control. His reactions to these events were overwrought and, in the end, futile. He blamed the others for making bad choices, and he was plotting dire consequences for them all when one of his golf buddies said to him, “No one can be in control of the lives of others.” “Shut your damn mouth,” was his response. But this same week one of his friends who was reading Asian religion shared with him the notion that “humiliation is the pathway to enlightenment.” Further, a guest pastor had preached on the text where Jesus says to his disciples, “The rulers of the Gentile world lord it over others, but it must not be so among you. The greatest among you shall be the servant of all.” Other things also happened that week, all of which seemed to conspire to make plain to this particular man at this particular time in his life that being “a real man” and being “in control” were not the same thing.

But giving up this notion felt to him like a dreadful emptiness and a most profound confusion of almost everything in his life. Nevertheless, he chose to accept the Awe of being “out of control” as his valid life, he loosened up his hold on his family and began a journey into a deeper realization of what it meant to live his whole life in a fresh manner, one that gave more honor to the role of basic freedom in his own life and in the lives of others.

Following the imagery we are exploring in the Fourth Gospel, this man’s golf buddy, his reading friend, and a guest pastor were (to him) the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence bringing light into his darkness. Did this man fully realize that he had heard “Jesus” speak to him three times? Perhaps not. Yet he surely did know that he had been blind and that now he saw. And in choosing to see, he was trusting in the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. No doctrines had to be involved here, just action--the action of faith.

4. The essence of the new life into which we have been born again

It will be a disappointment to many blind people in this world to learn that Jesus, the Ultimate Message, does not deliver us **from** our real lives but opens us up to our real lives. As we cease being blind, we come to realize that we have been caught up in trying to get out of living our real lives. Perhaps we had actually gotten out of our real lives into some froth of surface living. Perhaps we were quite content with this froth and keenly defensive toward any insinuation that this froth was not our real lives. Whether we were happily living a frothy life or

unhappily living a life we did not want, the deliverance we sought was certainly not deliverance to our real lives. Real life is filled with dread and fascination and excitement of such intensity that most of us opt for something calmer. Real life is filled with such overwhelming responsibility for the lives of others and for the whole course of history that most of us opt for something easier. So the blind do not seek to be born again. They seek to be left alone or to be transported to the land of their fondest dreams. They do not acknowledge that they are in despair over their real lives, and they may find the notion of actually living their real lives to be the least appealing of all the options.

Nevertheless, this is the good news of the Ultimate Message: that our real lives are the only truly glorious and happy lives in the offing. The Ultimate Message rescues us from the illusion that some other option will be good for us. The Ultimate Message enables us to resolve to be the BE that the Infinite Silence has assigned us to BE.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel explores these matters further in the other chapters of his (or her) remarkable drama.

3. Food that Lasts

John 6:26-71

Jesus replied, “Here is the full truth, I know that you have not come looking for me because you saw signs of my true significance, but because you ate the bread and your hunger was satisfied. You must work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of Eternal Life.”

This is the key metaphor of the sixth chapter of John: life requires food. Finite life requires food; similarly, Eternal Life requires food. But what is Eternal Life? Answering this question is our first big hurdle in finding relevant meaning for our lives in this chapter of the Fourth Gospel.

Most contemporary, traditional, literalistic Christians simply assume that Eternal Life means some sort of life after you die. By “Eternal Life” they assume that this gospel writer is speaking of the destiny of our immortal soul in some heavenly place. But the writer of the Fourth Gospel never explicitly mentions an immortal soul. Furthermore, the author of this gospel is quite clear that Eternal Life is something to be experienced in “the Living Now.” Jesus, the Ultimate Message, the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence, gives Eternal Life NOW to those who trust him.

When the author of this gospel speaks of Eternal Life with regard to the future, this phrase is often used: “will lift up the trusters on the last day.” The context in which this phrase is used has to do with the Ultimate Message not abandoning those who experience Eternal Life NOW. In other words, this quality of aliveness (Eternal Life) is totally secure. Eternal life lasts, unlike every other kind of aliveness. So if you are going to use the mythology about a final reckoning at the end of time, then you would, of course, have to say what the gospel writer says: in the final reckoning of all history, those who are Alive in this Infinite, lasting way will be appropriately honored in that final reckoning. Eternal Life, which is available right NOW, is not a passing phenomenon; it is a lasting ingredient in the entire fabric of Reality.

So what about the existence of heaven and or of our going to heaven? Again the writer of the Fourth Gospel speaks of “heaven” as something that can characterize “the Living Now.” The Ultimate Message, the Singular Offspring is said to come “down” NOW from heaven. The food he brings comes “down” NOW from heaven. The Infinite Silence does not “come down,” but the Offspring of the Infinite Silence does “come down”-- that is, does enter into the finite dynamics of human existence. So “heaven” is where “God, the Infinite Silence” dwells and “down” is where we dwell.

In our century we have the opportunity, if we wish to take it, to be clear that this “up and down” talk is metaphorical speech. Literally speaking, there is no transcendent “up” and there is no earthly “down.” The Infinite, as an experience of humanity, can be distinguished from our experiences of finite processes. But we need not talk of these two aspects of our experience as “up” and “down.” We could just as easily say that the Ultimate Message has “come up” from the profound deeps and entered into our surface living. In the following rephrasing of the Fourth Gospel, I will substitute for the metaphors “heaven” and “up” the metaphors “profound deeps” and “down.” This will, I hope, help to jar our minds loose from whatever remnants of literal transcendent thinking still cling to us.

So with these considerations in mind, let us return to the discussion of food in the sixth chapter of the Fourth Gospel. The Jesus character in this drama is speaking of food that lasts:

“This food the prophetic personage standing before you will give to you, for he it is upon whom the Infinite Silence has set the seal of Infinite authority.”

“Then what must we do,” they asked him “if we are to work as the Infinite Silence would have us work?”

Jesus replied, “This is the work that the Infinite Silence requires: trust in the one whom the Infinite Silence has sent to you.”

They said, “But what sign can you give us, so that we may trust you? What is the work you do? Our ancestors had manna to eat in the desert: as Scripture says, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ “

Jesus answered, “I tell you this, the truth is not that Moses gave you Lasting bread, but that my Infinite Parent gives you right now the Lasting bread. The bread that the Infinite Silence gives comes up from the profound deeps and brings Life to the finite world of humanity.”

They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread now and always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, and whoever trusts in me shall never be thirsty. But you, as I have said, do not trust me although you have seen me. All those whom the Infinite Parent gives me will come to me, and every person who comes to me I will never turn away. I have come into your lives from the Infinite deeps, not to do my own will, but the will of the Infinite who sent me. It is the will of the Infinite that I should not lose even one of all those whom the Infinite has given to me, but, in the final reckoning, lift them up to my quality of Livingness. For it is my Infinite Parent’s will that everyone who looks upon the Offspring and puts trust in the Offspring shall experience now an Eternal quality of Aliveness, and furthermore I will make sure, in the final reckoning, that this Aliveness is exalted.”

At this the religiously trained persons began to murmur disapprovingly because he said, “I am the bread which has come up from the Infinite deeps.” They said, “Surely this is Jesus, son of Joseph; we know his father and mother. How can he now say, ‘I am the bread which has come up from the Infinite deeps?’”

Jesus answered, “Stop murmuring among yourselves. No one can come to me unless that person is drawn by the Infinite Parent who sent me; and I will indeed exalt that person in the final reckoning. It is written in the prophets: ‘And they shall all be taught by the Infinite Silence.’ Everyone who has listened to the Infinite Parent and learned from the Infinite Parent will come to me.”

Several key questions are virtually forced on our minds by these verses: (1) What in actual human experience is meant by this “Eternal quality of Aliveness”? (2) How is Jesus, who is also the Ultimate Message, food that feeds this Eternal quality of Aliveness? (3) How can any mere human being “whose father and mother we know” also be bread arriving from the Infinite deeps? And (4), what does it mean to say that the Infinite Silence has to draw the trusting person to the Ultimate Message which Jesus embodies?

(1) Eternal Aliveness

First, I am going to attempt to illustrate in my own human experience what I believe this gospel writer is pointing to with Eternal Life in the living Now.

In our current culture we complain about being busy, but we basically believe that being busy is a good thing. Only occasionally do we wonder if being busy is just a superficial style of living. In our best moments, we may even see that our over anxious busyness is a socially acceptable form of madness.

In his book *The Works of Love*, Søren Kierkegaard said that true action, compassionate action is the very opposite of busyness. Profound love is action, but it is not busyness. To be busy, Kierkegaard says, means being divided and scattered, to be occupying yourself with what makes you divided and scattered.

I certainly understand the feeling of this. I have a long list of things to do. The list is sometimes overwhelming. I never get everything checked off. Some things, like reconstructing my filing system, have been on my list for years. I am just too busy to ever get down that far on the ever growing list. There is this trip to make, this writing to do, this person to see, this gardening to do, this house to fix, this thing to do for my better health, this pile of books to read. So I speak back to Kierkegaard, "How can I avoid being busy? And if I am not busy, how can I avoid being guilty over not being busy?"

This is Kierkegaard's answer: the person who occupies himself or herself with the Eternal is never busy. But what does that mean? It does not mean withdrawing from life or becoming passive. It does not mean doing less and taking more time for leisure, for we can be just as busy at leisure as we are at work. In order not to be divided and scattered into busyness, we must be united in one unifying passion. Only the Eternal, says Kierkegaard, can be that one passion which accomplishes a unified life. When only finite passions occupy my life, my profound inner being is divided and restless. Only in the Eternal can I be at one--united in an Eternal rest.

Eternal rest? That sounds wonderful, but what is it? The human being is a strange sort of life form. We are finite, limited, and thus busy with many things. But, at the same time, we can self-consciously relate to the Infinite. By the Infinite, I mean that Eternal Oneness which brings all the many finite things to be and brings all the many finite things not to be. This Eternal Oneness does not come and go like the many elements of our lives. The Eternal Oneness just goes on and on.

We can get a sense of this by simply contemplating the experience of Now. A number of sages have pointed this out: in our inner experience of life, the time is always Now. If you think about time objectively, "Now" is only the dividing line between past and future. That line is infinitely thin. Everything is either past or future. There is no "Now," objectively speaking. But in our inner experience, it is only Now. The past is only memory which we are experiencing in the Now. The future is only anticipation which we are experiencing in the Now. There never has been a time in which it was not Now and there never will be a time in which it is not Now in our inner experience. The more I examine this simple, obvious truth, the more mysterious it becomes.

In the Now, I am at rest in a relation to that which does not come and go with the passing of time. All finite things come and go. But my inclusive relationship with all finite things and with their Infinite Source does not come and go, it is always right there. In that ever present relationship, I am either despairing over all things or rejoicing over all things and glad to be part of this wondrous process.

When I am keenly conscious of this Eternal relationship and glad to be it, then I am not busy. I face the same life, the same tasks to be done, the same long lists of undone things, but I am not

scattered and divided among them. I can, with a certain exuberant freedom, grab one thing off my list and do it with joyous abandon. I don't have to get it done in order to be somebody. I don't have to do it well in order not to be guilty. I can just do it, and then release it into that Infinite sea of done doings and do the next thing. The key attitude here is not to be trapped in the passing flow, but to be at rest in the Eternal Now.

This strange rest does not mean inaction, for I must always be doing some action. Even sleep is an action, in the sense I mean. So in this rest, I act, I act, I act, and I continue acting and yet, at the same time, I rest. I am going no place other than being in the Eternal Now I am already in. And if I sense myself, in this Eternal Now, as blessed, as loved, as having been offered a precious opportunity to live a wondrous life, then I can be, in all my actions, compassionate toward my fellow beings.

Such compassionate action is not busyness. It flows from a super-abundant life, lived at rest in the Eternal Now.

I am drawn to the word "rest." I do not want to be restless in the way that one is restless when some specific finite matter has to be resolved before I can be at rest. When I am living in this Eternal Now, I am detached from all specific finite matters, no matter how pressing they may be. I know that my essential life does not depend on the outcome of any one thing. I am at home. I am at rest. I am at rest before, during, and after the outcome of each and every project. This rest moves with me. It quiets me. It absorbs all worldly anxieties. It transforms all problems into challenges. It transforms all guilt into lessons for better living.

Rest in the Eternal Now reminds me that the past is past and that even the consequences of the past are passing. Rest in the Eternal Now reminds me that the future has not yet arrived and that the challenges for this day, this moment, this Now are the only real challenges there are. Rest in the Eternal Now reminds me that I am a relation with the Eternal and that my deepest happiness resides in simply being this being which I inescapably am.

These reflections explain why setting aside an hour each day for some sort of solitary exercise is so important. A solitary exercise, properly constructed, is not just one more thing to add to my busy schedule. Rather, a solitary exercise is time set aside for intensive focus on living in the Eternal Now; time set aside to enable all of my time to be time lived in the Eternal Now. A solitary exercise is not withdrawal from my real life. It is action. It is practice for my real life. It is part of my real life, and it is an important part of my real life because it is aimed at making all of my living more happy, more effective, more compassionate. It accomplishes this by assisting me to find that "place" of Eternal Now from which "place" all passing things can find a unity, a singularity, an integrity. A solitary exercise, properly constructed and faithfully done, assists me day after day to remember in my deepest body and awareness to live each day in the Eternal Now.

These reflections also explain why setting aside two hours each week to be with other Spirit-disciplined people is so important. The conscious gaze and acts of other persons who wish to serve me by assisting me to live my life in the Eternal Now is of inestimable value for assisting me to create effective solitary exercises and to remember, in all my living, to live from the Eternal Now.

These reflections upon doing solitary exercises and upon being with a group of other Spirit persons focuses our attention for this next question:

(2) What is the Food that feeds our Eternal Aliveness?

What is it about a solitary exercise or a group life with Spirit-awake persons that feeds us? We are fed by whoever or whatever brings us to an awareness of the Eternal Now and thus an awareness of the futility of ever finding Lasting Rest in the busyness of this finite world. Perhaps this happens as we are reading a very good book or interacting with an Eternally Alive companion. Somehow this book or this companion speaks to us in a way that arrests us. "Stop, you are arrested; you are guilty of futile busyness." This arrest, this judgment upon our futile living, also calls us to trust our welcome home to Eternal Rest. And if we do trust this fundamentally humiliating experience, if we do confess our futile busyness, if we do welcome our welcome home to Eternal Rest, then we find that our Eternal Aliveness is flourishing. Our deep Aliveness has been FED.

And where does this FOOD come from? It comes up from the profound deeps to our surface living. And what is this FOOD? It is the Ultimate Message coming to us in fleshly form. Indeed, it is none other than Jesus, the Ultimate Message who comes to us. But in my specific case the arrest might be carried out by Susan Jones whose father and mother I know. So how can Susan Jones be Jesus, the Ultimate Message?

Well, what does Susan Jones say? Perhaps she says that I am off the mark--living in my finite busyness. She says that I can receive NOW the welcome home of the Infinite Silence, that I can enter NOW the Eternal Rest. Susan's message to me is identical with the Ultimate Message spoken about by the writer of the Fourth Gospel. Susan stands in the dynamic that the Fourth Gospel calls "Jesus." Susan is the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. Susan is Lasting Food offered to me.

And what does it mean to eat this food? It means trusting the messenger sent from the Infinite Silence. It means welcoming into my life the welcome of the Infinite Silence of which Susan speaks.

The foregoing thoughts begin to illuminate this basic paradox: a mere human (Susan or Jesus) can also be the Ultimate Message of the Infinite Silence.

(3) How a mere human being can be bread arriving from the Infinite deeps?

If we insist on using our objective scientific minds to unravel this basic paradox, we plainly and simply cannot understand it. How can a finite being also be Infinite? We have to be born into the Spirit mode of perception to perceive the truth of this paradox.

As a Spirit being who already is a relationship with the Infinite Silence, I can see that Susan is also a Spirit being in a relationship with the Infinite Silence. Neither Susan who speaks to me nor I who listen are merely finite beings. As Nikos Kazantzakis put it, I am not merely "a vaporous phosphorescence on a damp meadow, a miserable worm that crawls and loves, that shouts and talks about wings for an hour or two until his mouth is blocked with earth." Rather, "within me a deathless Cry, superior to me, continues to shout."⁸

So Susan Jones, who has this deathless Cry within her can speak to me and awaken the deathless Cry within me. If I awake from my stupor and be the being who indeed hears this deathless Cry, then Susan has become for me both Susan and the Ultimate Message. Susan has become food, Lasting Food, to me.

⁸ Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) page 68

(4) The Infinite Silence draws the trusting person to the Ultimate Message

But in order for me to actually trust Susan, to acknowledge that Susan is indeed the Ultimate Message from the Infinite Silence, I need to be drawn to Susan by the Infinite Silence. What does this mean? I, within myself, am a potential for relationship with the Infinite Silence. If this were not so, then I could never see Susan as the Ultimate Message, nor Jesus. For Jesus was fully human just like Susan. Jesus shows Susan and me what it means to be human. It means being my inescapable finitude, but being human also means acknowledging that Deathless Cry that is screaming within me. I am a finite being relating self-awarably with the Infinite Silence.

So I do not receive from Jesus or Susan a message which is totally alien to me. Rather the message they bring to me is only perceived by me because the Infinite Silence is already giving me that Message within my own self-aware being. I, in my blindness and waywardness, need Jesus and Susan to arrest me and to jar me into hearing this Message, but if I do hear their Message, it is because the Infinite Silence is speaking directly to me. If I am not being “drawn” by the Infinite Silence, then I am not hearing the Ultimate Message when that Message is being spoken by another human being.

And this direct connection with the Infinite is a most fortunate circumstance, for if this were not the case, then I would be in a dependent relationship with Susan or Jesus. Perhaps I would be a sentimental groupy hanging onto the words of some authoritarian guru. But since I am drawn to Jesus or Susan or any other Spirit person by the Infinite Silence, I have my own authority, my own experience, my own freedom, my own independence. I am myself an Offspring of the Infinite Silence rather than merely being a miserable doctrine believer who is trying unsuccessfully to believe in some ridiculous doctrine that I am told is coming to me from some high authority. “Jesus is the Son of God, and He says so, so I believe it.” No, No, No! Only if I am myself the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence can I understand and trust someone else who is the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence. I must myself be drawn to the Ultimate Message by the Source of that Ultimate Message, which Source I experience directly within my own being.

Some Christian theologians have interpreted “drawn by the Father” to mean some sort of predestination: “I believe in Jesus because I was predestined to believe in Jesus.” Such thinking only adds another layer of misunderstanding on top of what is already being misunderstood. No, No, No! The cosmos is not a phonograph record playing itself out. Trusting the Ultimate Message of the Infinite Silence is a free deed that I can do or not do. If I do it, I do so in the power of the Infinite Silence who gives me my freedom and who drew me to this crisis of decision for or against trusting the Infinite Silence. But if I do not trust, it is not because I was predestined to be untrusting, but because I choose not to trust in spite of my many opportunities to do so. Having so chosen, I have forgotten those choices. I have indeed entered into a blindness from which I must be rescued by some fleshly embodiment of the Ultimate Message. But this blindness need not be permanent. No cosmic fiat has been made about whether my life shall continue in blindness or shall be awakened to the Truth and choose to live that Truth.

Fate is involved here. I may never encounter the Message bearer I need to encounter. Each specific Message bearer chooses to speak to me or chooses not to speak to me: it is his or her choice. Furthermore, I may be fleeing all humiliating experiences rather than seeking them out, so I avoid hearing what I need to hear. But let us assume that I am, in spite of all my fleeing, arrested by some bearer of the Ultimate Message. This is not predestination; it is just an opportunity which is given to me. Every opportunity has a certain fatedness. It happens to me, and it might not have happened. But every opportunity also has an unfatedness: I can take the opportunity or not take it. Spiritual birth, in this regard, is somewhat like our experience of

physical birth. It happens to me as a matter of fate, but then I must choose to live this birth or not live it. In the case of Spirit birth, the birth does not fully happen unless I choose it, but the opportunity to choose it precedes the choice. It is wrongheaded to blame the Infinite Silence for not giving me enough opportunities to overcome my blindness and trust the Infinite Silence. Such blaming is itself a rejection of an opportunity to trust. Trust is my deed. And also my trust can only happen because the Infinite Silence with whom I am a self-aware relationship drew me into this opportunity to trust.

With these awarenesses in our consciousness, let us return to the script in the sixth chapter of John. The Jesus character in this drama continues to speak:

“I do not mean that a finite human being has seen the Infinite Parent. Yet the One who has come from The Infinite Silence has seen the Infinite Parent, no one else. In truth, in complete truthfulness, I tell you, any trusting human being experiences Now the Eternal Aliveness. I am the bread of life. Your foreparents ate the manna in the desert and they are dead. I am speaking to you of the bread that comes up from the profound deeps, which a person may eat and never die. I am that living bread which has come up from the profound deeps: if anyone eats this bread that person shall live the quality of Aliveness that Lasts. Moreover, the bread which I will give is my own flesh; I give it to restore Aliveness to the blind world of humanity.”

This led to a fierce dispute among the trained religious folk. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they said.

Jesus replied, “In truth, in complete truthfulness, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of this prophetic figure standing before you and drink his blood, you can have no Aliveness within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses, right Now, Eternal Aliveness, and I will lift up that person in the final reckoning. My flesh is real food; my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells continually in me and I dwell in that person. As the Infinitely Living Parent sent me, and I live because of the Infinite Parent, so he who eats me shall live because of me. This is the bread which came up from the profound deeps; and it is not like the bread which our parents ate: they are dead, but whoever eats this bread shall live Now the Life that Lasts.”

This was spoken in the synagogue when Jesus was teaching in Capernaum. Many of his disciples on hearing it exclaimed, “Yuck, this is more than we can stomach! Why listen to such talk?”

Jesus was aware that his disciples were murmuring about it and asked them, “Does this shock you? What if you see this very prophetic figure who is standing before you now move into the profound deeps from which he came? Spirit Awareness alone gives Aliveness to what I say: the flesh is of no avail; the words which I have spoken to you are both Spirit and Life. And yet there are some of you who have no trust.”

For Jesus knew all along who were without trust and who was to betray him. So he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it has been granted to him by the Infinite Parent.”

From that time on, many of his disciples withdrew and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave me?”

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of Eternal Aliveness. We have trust, and we know that you are the One inspired by the Infinite Silence.”

Jesus answered, “Have I not chosen you, all twelve? Yet one of you is totally without trust.”

He meant Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. He it was who would betray him, and he was one of the Twelve.

Clearly the writer of this fabulous play wants to shock his audience into a level of understanding that breaks beneath the rational superficialities that plagued the minds of those to whom he was speaking. Walking close to Jesus did not assure one of seeing what Jesus was all about. And walking miles and centuries away does not prevent us from seeing what needs to be seen. Each of us is being challenged by this play. We can be challenged by this play even if we have never before in our lives embraced the Christian formulas alluded to in its lines.

So what indeed does it mean to eat the flesh of Jesus and to drink his blood? Droning these words in churches for two millennia has not made this any clearer. Only Spirit rebirth in your life or my life right Now can make any sense whatsoever of these familiar symbols.

So, assuming that you and I are not totally blind (Spiritually speaking), what does it mean to eat the flesh of the Ultimate Message bearer and drink his or her blood? Clearly we are not talking simply about the flesh and blood of the historical Jesus who lived almost two thousand years ago. We are talking about the “Jesus” whom you or I might have met this morning. We are talking about any Susan or any Antonio who may have been to us the Ultimate Message. Whoever bears the Ultimate Message is the Ultimate Message, for the Ultimate Message is not a bunch of words or a bunch of awarenesses. The Ultimate Message is a living, bodily human being: the Ultimate Message is always a flesh and blood Messenger. It only takes one thing to make Susan or Antonio into the Ultimate Messenger: trust in the Ultimate Message as that Messenger-born-Message comes into our lives.

So what does it mean to eat the flesh of Susan and drink her blood? It means to accept the sacrifice she has made for us. She has taken on the task of humiliating us. She has accused us of being blind. We have probably fought back, in the first instance, accusing her of being blind, perhaps slapping her face or far worse. Now with her blood on our hands, we notice that Susan is not blind, that we are. Susan just stands there as our judge and as our forgiveness beckoning us to give up our blindness and live in the Light, to join her as a member of the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence--those who trust the Infinite Silence and all the Messengers sent by the Infinite Silence. If we choose to join her, we become not another Susan, but another member of the Singular Offspringhood of the Infinite Silence. And this is the Life that Lasts. Susan has been Food indeed, the very same Food that Jesus fed to the blind and despairing persons he encountered.

But how do we know that Susan or Antonio (or Jesus of Nazareth for that matter) is the Singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence? There are a host of false prophets who make claims for our trust. How do we know who is who? The Infinite Silence draws us. The Infinite Silence tells us. Hearing the Ultimate Message is an interior event in our own lives, an event given to us from the Infinite, given to us directly. If this event is happening, then we hear the Ultimate Message embodied by these Messengers. We know who are Sons and Daughters of the Infinite Silence through the illumination that is bubbling up in our own self-aware relatedness to the Infinite Silence. Unless the Infinite Silence has made us a Son or a Daughter, we do not have eyes

to see who are the Offspring of the Infinite Silence and who are not. So if we hear the Ultimate Message in some Messenger, we are also the Ultimate Message in our own being. We have been “drawn” to that Messenger by an event going on in our own interior lives, an event being effected by the Infinite Silence with whom we are (and have always been) a relationship.

So you or I, if we hear, are Offspring of the Infinite Silence, but it is also true that neither you nor I nor any of our companions is perfected in Offspringhood. So what we actually experience with our Spirit eyes is seeing when our companions are manifesting Offspringhood and when they are not. And because we are not perfected in our own Offspringhood, we can also make mistakes in our perceptions of the Spirit condition of others. In fact, even if I were perfect in my Offspringhood and an incredibly intelligent and perceptive person besides, I might still make mistakes in my perception of others. But these limitations do not mean that we must become passive and not act upon the vision we have into the lives of others. No, the Sons and Daughters of the Infinite Silence are not passive. They actively work to bring the Message that needs to be brought to the blind and despairing generation among whom they dwell. The task of the Eternally Alive is to bring this very Life to others. And they do so by sacrificing their flesh and blood, by feeding the blind and rejecting world the Food that Lasts, a food that may seem yucky to those who are still hoping for something else. The Food that Lasts may seem at first to be a gigantic humiliation, no matter how kindly the messenger may be.

“Humiliation,” some Asian sage has said, “is the pathway to enlightenment.” The flesh and blood of the sage who performs the service of humiliating blind, arrogant, despairing persons is the very food which those who are so humiliated must eat to attain Eternal Aliveness.

4. True Authority

John 8:12-59

Chapter eight contains one of the greatest dialogues in the Fourth Gospel. This dialogue between Jesus and “the religiously trained Jews” is pure fiction. The gospel writer created it. Some modern Christians are appalled at the idea that the gospel writer could be so audacious as to put words in the mouth of Jesus. How, they ask, can we be expected to place our trust in a Jesus who is pure fiction?

The gospel writer was surely aware that Jesus was a real person, a Nazarene who lived decades earlier. So this is historical fiction in that sense. But the gospel writer was also aware of something more: the gospel writer “knows” what Jesus needs to say in the tenth decade of the first century because the gospel writer is Jesus! That is, the gospel writer clearly believes that anyone who trusts Jesus becomes Jesus.

In the very first chapter, it was made clear that those who receive this Ultimate Message, become that Message--become Offspring of the Infinite Silence who have had a virgin birth. This theme is repeated in every chapter. We are given permission to identify with Jesus in all that he says and does. Later in this gospel, we will hear the gospel writer have Jesus say that those who trust in Jesus will do even greater things than Jesus has done. Clearly the gospel writer sees himself or herself as Jesus, as the Ultimate Message, as the walk of the Infinite Silence among finite humanity.

So the fictional character, Jesus, created by the writer of the Fourth Gospel is not simply fiction, for “Jesus” is creating this fiction. If you take the fiction literally, you are not seeing matters from the “Spirit” perspective. You are indeed in the dark. But if you are willing to see this fictional Jesus as picturing a real option for your own life, then the entire Fourth Gospel can come alive for you. And this applies to the other gospels as well, for the authors of Mark, Matthew, and Luke also accepted permission to “be Jesus” and thus boldly expand upon what the historical Jesus actually said and did.

Identifying with Jesus in the dialogues of the Fourth Gospel can, however, be quite challenging. Imagine hearing yourself say these lines to your contemporaries:

Once again Jesus addressed the people, “I am the Light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark. He or she shall have the Light of Life.”

Are you willing to take in the possibility that you, if you are a person who really trusts the Infinite Silence, are illumination for every person you meet? Can you handle such boundless confidence, such audacity, such profound responsibility? And if you do act from this confidence, how do you expect people will respond to you? Let’s hear how they responded to Jesus in this fictional dialogue.

Once again Jesus addressed the people, “I am the Light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark. He or she shall have the Light of Life.”

The religious teachers said to him, “You are witness in your own cause; your testimony is not valid.”

Jesus replied, “My testimony is valid, even though I do bear witness about myself;

because I know where I have come from and where I am going. You do not know either where I come from or where I am going. You judge by worldly standards. I pass judgment on no person, but if I do judge, my judgment is valid because it is not I alone who judge, but I and the One who sent me. In your own law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. Here I am, a witness in my own cause, and my other witness is the Infinite Parent who sent me.”

They asked, “Where is your Infinite Parent?”

Jesus replied, “You know neither me nor my Infinite Parent; if you knew me you would know my Infinite Parent as well.”

The gospel writer is engaging in some humor here. When Jesus says, “I have two witnesses, myself and the Infinite,” that should settle the matter of his authority, but his distracters are not amused by this ploy. They claim that this Infinite witness is nowhere to be seen. And Jesus pulls the rug from under them yet again by pointing out that both witnesses (both the Infinite Silence and Jesus) are absent to their blind eyes. If you cannot see the Infinite Silence backing up Jesus, you do not see Jesus, for that is who Jesus is--the authentic human backed up by the Infinite Silence.

How can we get inside the inner experience of this Jesus character which the gospel writer has created? How can we see what it might mean for you or for me to have the Infinite Parent backing up what we have to say? It is my experience that if you want the Infinite Parent to back you up, you have to say exactly what the Infinite Parent will back up. This reminds me of a humorous story about a guitar player who always went at dawn to play the sun up. When asked how this bit of music could make the sun rise, he replied that he had to play at the right time. This is what Jesus had to do as well. He had to play the right tune at the right time. He had to do what the Infinite commanded, and then the Infinite was his backup witness.

Perhaps on some occasion you have given a very good speech and heard the echo of the Infinite in every word you were saying. To make this work you have to tell “it” the way it is. And when you do, THE WAY IT IS backs you up. The people listening already know THE WAY IT IS from their own experience. So when you point out what everyone knows or can know, you get an echo. For example, if you say something obvious like, “There was a time when each of us was not here,” the Infinite Silence produces an echo, “THERE WAS A TIME WHEN EACH OF US WAS NOT HERE.” You continue, “And there will come a time when each of us will no longer be here.” The echo continues, “AND THERE WILL COME A TIME WHEN EACH OF US WILL NO LONGER BE HERE.” See how easy this is? All you have to do is say “it” the way it is and THE WAY IT IS echoes what you say.

I believe this is precisely what the gospel writer was getting at with this humorous dialogue on the subject of the authority with which the Jesus figure spoke. Jesus’ authority comes from his obedience to the WAY IT IS.

So when Jesus says, “I am the light of the world--light for this blind world of humanity,” we are being challenged to look and see if we can hear some kind of echo from the Infinite Silence about Jesus being this “Light.” What would it mean if we, rather than argue with this Jesus character or with this gospel writer, simply stopped, looked to see, listened to hear what the Infinite Silence has to “say” about what this gospel writer is saying through the mouth of this Jesus character? If we can do this, then we can grasp how the gospel writer is dealing with the question of Jesus’ authority.

So how is it that this chapter is raising the question of authority? The question of authority is

being asked as follows: What would it mean for us to HEAR THE SPEECH of the INFINITE SILENCE? Further, what would it mean for us to BE THE SPEECH of the INFINITE SILENCE?

The Jesus figure in this gospel claims that he, in his own being, is that SPEECH--that he is the Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence to humanity. And thus, as this Jesus figure stands vulnerably before his companions in life, he can claim that the Infinite Silence is the authority for what he has to say.

Let us take a small detour and examine the way "authority" has been grappled with in the last few hundred years of Western history.

(1) In the middle ages, Christian tradition was experienced as a deep well of authority. And any contradictions or ambivalences in this authority were resolved by the hierarchical ecclesiastical structure culminating in the Pope. (2) Luther and other Protestant reformers challenged this way of establishing authority by claiming that the Ultimate Message, the Truth by which we must live, was contained in the Christian Scriptures and those Scriptures were interpretable by any person of faith. Thus began a conflict in Western society between the authority of Christian tradition as codified by the church and the authority of the founding documents of Christian tradition. (3) At the same time as the Protestant reformation, another way of establishing the authority of truth was being promoted by Erasmus and others. Autonomous human reason was claimed to have a direct contact with the rational truth of the cosmos, and such reason, it was claimed, should be our authority in both daily practice and in our ethical challenges. (4) A fourth mode of authority was born with the rise of the empirical sciences. The authority in this case was not reason, in the more general sense, but reason obedient to the empirical facts. After Bacon, Newton and others, factual experience became for most of us the primary root of authority. Reason was involved; we had to rationally state the tenets of truth we wanted to test with our objective experience. But experience, not reason, was the authority in the scientific method of truth.

Now all four of these modes of authority still exist in common use today and are often intricately combined with one another. One final development in this story completes the picture I want us to have in mind. Standing lucidly within our commitment to the scientific mode of truth we have come to realize that all scientific truth is approximate. New factual experiences confound old theories, and this forces us to invent new theories which are then later also confounded. Reflecting upon this, we realize that we never arrive at final certainty through the scientific method. We only have approximate certainty, useful for our practical lives, but unsatisfying as some kind of ultimate truth upon which we can base our entire living. Furthermore, scientific truth does not assist us in precisely those arenas where we feel our deepest need for some illuminating truth: namely, in determining our basic values and making our biggest ethical decisions. The scientific mode of truth seems to leave each person to develop their own "opinions" in those realms of living that matter most.

So it has become fashionable in contemporary culture to claim that there is no ultimate authority in ethical matters. This position can also be stated by saying that each of us is our own authority--that there is no "outside" authority to which each of us must be obedient. This way of thinking about authority seems at first glance to affirm the individual person, but in the end it destroys the individual person by delivering him or her over to arrogant egoism and sheer foolishness. We now have the ridiculous spectacle of people closing down all quest for the truth by claiming that their opinion on some matter is as good as anyone else's opinion because all truth is, in the final analysis, just a matter of opinion. I call this mode of thinking "thoroughgoing relativism." Most of us only apply such thoroughgoing relativism to the sensitive ethical parts of our living, admitting that obedience to the facts of scientific investigation

is advisable for avoiding disasters in our more straightforward practical lives.

Now, with all this in mind let us return to the eighth chapter of the gospel of John and reflect together upon what I believe is one of the greatest bits of dialogue in the entire history of human literature on the subject of authority.

The earlier chapters of this gospel have already explored the meaning of blindness and of Light. The Ultimate Message is the Light. The Ultimate Message is the foundational illumination that the Infinite Silence loves us--that the Infinite Silence is trustworthy--that the Infinite Silence is fully understood only when the Infinite is seen as our ever-enduring Parent. Those who do not see this (who do not trust this) are in the dark.

And for the writer of the Fourth Gospel, it is not a matter of opinion who is in the dark and who is not. You are either in the dark or you are not in the dark. And the final court of appeal is not you or me or Jesus. The final court of appeal is the Infinite Silence. And this final court of appeal is not the same as the authority of Christian tradition or the authority of Christian Scripture. Christian tradition and Christian scripture are given whatever authority they have by the authority of the Infinite Silence. Similarly, Buddhist teachings and Taoist teachings and any other teachings are given whatever authority they have by the authority of the Infinite Silence. Jesus is given whatever authority he has by the authority of the Infinite Silence. And, most shocking of all, you or I are given whatever authority we have by the authority of the Infinite Silence.

So what is this authority of the Infinite Silence? Well, first of all it means that I must give up my egoistic hope that my opinion is as good as anyone else's opinion. I must explore how my opinions and everyone else's opinions are either validated or humbled by an Infinite reference. The Infinite Silence supports or opposes our opinions. If we want to have authority, we must obey the Infinite Silence. Now what, in our own most personal experience, does it mean to obey or not to obey the Infinite Silence?

Disobeying or "being in the darkness" means that you are in despair over your actual life, for your actual life is "actually" a relationship with the Infinite Silence. So the opposite of trusting the Infinite Silence is despairing over your actual life. This despair can be quite subtle, very hidden from view, not even felt at this time by the despairing person. But however unconscious, it is still darkness, still despair. In fact, despair that is openly felt is less dark than despair that is so buried in the unconscious that the poor despairer does not even know that despair is present. What could be more tragic than unconscious despair? When we are in such despair, an invisible unknown darkness is robbing you or me of the Life that Lasts. A person that is raving in open despair is at least somewhat clear that Abundant Life is absent. The person who is "happily" unconscious that Abundant Life is absent is even more in the dark.

So in this sense, every experience of despair is an experience of the Infinite Silence. It is always the Infinite Silence that is driving us to despair. We are in despair because we seek for our lives to be fundamentally different from what the Infinite Silence is actually providing or not providing. But this despair, understood in the light of the Ultimate Message, is a doorway to the truth of the Ultimate Message. Self-conscious despair is a passageway from darkness to light. So if the Infinite Silence is driving us to despair, then trusting the Infinite Silence at such a moment means accepting despair as a step forward. Sheer hopelessness about having life on our own terms can become hope for a life on the terms given by the Infinite Silence.

So what does it mean to enter into the light? It means trusting and obeying the Infinite Silence--accepting what is given, trusting the Infinite Giver of every aspect of our lives. Such

trust conquers despair. Such trust ends the flight from reality and the fight with reality and joins reality in being real. If we are indeed joining reality in being real, then we can identify with this Jesus figure in The Fourth Gospel. So picture yourself as Jesus is this gospel writer's fiction. Picture yourself making the following audacious statements to the persistent authority seekers in this humorous drama. (I am skipping to the 23rd verse and rephrasing the metaphors as before.)

So Jesus continued, "You belong to the realm of blindness; I to the realm of truth. Your home is in this blind world, mine is not. That is why I told you that you will perish in your foolish off-the-mark actions. If you do not believe that I am what I am, then you will perish in your foolish off-the-mark actions."

They asked him, "Who are you?"

Jesus answered, "Why should I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you-- and in judgment. The Authority who sent me speaks the truth, and what I learned from this Authority I report to the blind world."

They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Infinite Parent. So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up this prophetic personage standing before you, you will know that I am what I am. I do nothing on my own authority, but in all that I say, I have been taught by my Infinite Parent. The Authority who sent me is present with me, and has not left me alone; for I always do what is acceptable to this Authority."

As Jesus said this, many "believed" him.

Turning to these religiously trained folk who "believed" him, Jesus said, "If you dwell within the revelation which I have brought, you are indeed my disciples; you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They replied, "We are Abraham's descendants; we have never been in slavery to any one. What do you mean by saying, 'You will become free.'?"

"In complete truth, I tell you," Jesus said, "Everyone who does off-the-mark actions is a slave. The slave has no permanent standing in the household, but the Offspring belongs to the household for ever. If then the Offspring sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descended from Abraham, but you are bent on killing me because my teaching makes no headway with you. I am revealing in words what I saw in my Infinite Parent's presence; and you are revealing in action what you learned from your parentage."

They retorted, "Abraham is our parent."

"If you were Abraham's children," Jesus replied, "you would do as Abraham did. As it is, you are bent on killing me, a man who told you the truth, as I heard it from the Infinite Silence. That is not how Abraham acted. You are doing the work of your parentage."

They said, "We are not illegitimate: The Infinite Silence is our parentage, and the Infinite Silence alone."

Jesus said, “If the Infinite Silence were your parent, you would love me, for the Infinite Silence is the source of my being, and from the Infinite Silence I have come. I have not come of my own accord; The Infinite Silence sent me. Why do you not understand my language? It is because my revelation is beyond your grasp. Your parentage is the evil one, and you choose to carry out the desire of your parent. Your parent was a murderer from the beginning, and is not rooted in the truth; there is no truth in your parent. When your parent tells a lie, this is the native tongue of your parent. Your parent is a liar and the parent of all lies. But I speak the truth and therefore you do not believe me. Which of you can prove me in the wrong? If what I say is true, why do you not believe me? Anyone who has the Infinite Silence as Parent listens to the words of the Infinite Silence. You are not the offspring of the Infinite Silence; that is why you do not listen.”

The religiously trained folk answered, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and that you are mad as well?”

“I am not mad,” said Jesus, “I am honoring my Infinite Parent, but you dishonor me. I do not care about my own glory, but there is One who does care, and that One is the judge (the final Authority). In complete truth I tell you, if anyone obeys my teaching, that person shall not die.”

The religiously trained folk said, “Now we know that you are mad. Abraham is dead; all the prophets are dead; and yet you say, ‘If anyone obeys my teaching, that person shall not die.’ Are you greater than our parent Abraham, who is dead? The prophets are dead too. What do you claim to be?”

Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, that glory of mine is worthless. It is the Infinite Silence who glorifies me, the same of whom you say, ‘This is our God,’ though you do not know the Infinite Silence. But I know the Infinite Silence; if I said that I did not know the Infinite Silence, I would be a liar like you. But in truth, I know the Infinite Silence and obey the speech of the Infinite Silence. Your parent Abraham was overjoyed to see my day; he saw it and was glad.”

The religiously trained folk protested, “You are not yet fifty years old. How can you have seen Abraham?”

Jesus said, “In complete truth I tell you, before Abraham was born, I AM.”

They picked up stones to hurl at him, but Jesus disappeared and made his way out of the temple.

The value of dialogue in religious literature is that the reader is challenged to identify with both parties in the dialogue. But identifying with either of the parties in the above dialogue is a challenge; for, on the one hand, we may find it preposterous to identify with someone who says “before Abraham was born, I AM,” and, on the other hand, we may find it difficult to identify with those whom Jesus calls “children of the evil one.”

Identifying with Jesus

Let’s begin with our blocks to identifying with the Jesus figure in this dialogue. Following the trends of popular Christian thought, we may have placed Jesus on a pedestal so high that identifying with him has been made impossible. If Jesus is a supernatural being infinitely different from us, then identifying with him is outlandish. The phrase “before Abraham was born, I AM,” sounds like this Jesus figure is making himself out to be identical with God. The

religiously trained people in the dialogue thought that this was what Jesus meant. So, it is understandable that they, wishing to protect the sanctity of “God,” picked up stones to hurl at Jesus.

But let us assume that Jesus is a human being no different from you or me in his basic construction. It is true, of course, that in the theology of the New Testament, the figure of Jesus is drawn as the human being who has become fully human. If you or I cannot quite claim to be a full realization of our humanity, then Jesus is indeed different from us. But let us assume that this difference is only the difference between who we really are and our failure to be that full humanity.

This means that we must assume that it is theoretically possible for you to stand in the sandals of Jesus and say to some shocked crowd, “before Abraham was born, I AM.” Now taken literally, this statement is preposterous, indeed meaningless. As the writer of this gospel says over and over, “It is the Spirit that gives life.” A literal fleshly interpretation will get you nowhere in trying to understand the Fourth Gospel. If you are not “born of Spirit,” you will not be able to understand a single verse of this gospel.

So what would a Spirit-born person mean by saying such a line as “before Abraham was born I AM”? This question turns out to be a repeat of other similar questions: How is a “born again” person “the singular Offspring of the Infinite Silence?” Or this: How do you or I become someone who from his or her own being speaks the Ultimate Message to this blind world? Or this: How do you or I become “the Food that Lasts” for a hungry and thirsty humanity? Or this: How do you or I become “the Infinite Silence” walking among finite humanity? Unless we can answer all these questions, we do not understand how Jesus can be said to be all these outlandish things. And furthermore, unless we can identify with Jesus in all these ways, we are not “born again” of the Spirit.

So back to the imagery of chapter eight: under what circumstances would it be true that you or I could say this line about ourselves: “Before Abraham was born, I AM”? Clearly we have to look at this Spirit-wise. Flesh-wise the statement is ridiculous. My body did not exist before Abraham. My ego did not exist before Abraham. So what part of me did exist before Abraham? The Ultimate Message part of me! The good news that abundant life is trusting the Infinite Silence--this Message existed before Abraham. So if I AM this Message, then I existed before Abraham. Now what does it mean for me to be this Message? Very simple: if I trust it; I become it. This Message is not the sort of message you can hold at arm’s length. It is not a scientific theory. It is not a bit of rational philosophy. It is not a metaphysical overview. This Message claims to be a “revelation” of the “heart” of that Infinite Silence which actually confronts us in each and every encounter of our lives. A relationship with the Infinite Silence is who we inescapably are. And we are either in despair over this relationship or we are living this relationship in trust. There is no in between. If we live this relationship in trust, we become, in our own being, the Ultimate Message: we become the Infinite Silence walking among finite humanity.

In the opening chapter of this gospel, the writer established the formula that the Ultimate Message was the communication of the Infinite Silence--that the Ultimate Message was the Infinite Silence walking among us. Jesus, in being this Ultimate Message, was being the “speech” of the Infinite Silence. So how is it that you or I can also be the speech of the Infinite Silence? We have only to obey the Infinite Silence. And again, what does this mean?

First of all, it means giving up all our illusions, all our escapes from reality, all our refusals to be the being we actually are. The Infinite Silence is the giver of each and every finite arrangement of our lives. Obeying the Infinite Silence is the same choice as choosing to be the person we are in all the finite arrangements we are in. Further, the person we are is a

relationship with the Infinite Silence. Whatever our natural sciences and our naturalistic philosophers say about our being only a highly conscious worm, we know better if we are indeed being the Spirit person we actually are. A self-aware Spirit person knows that he or she is in Awe before the Infinite Silence. And we do not have to go to biblical scripture or to some other religious authority to see whether or not this is so. We know by direct experience whether or not we are in Awe before the Infinite Silence. And this direct experience is our authority.

When Awe happens to us, we can say “I am in Awe,” and the Infinite Silence will give echo, “RIGHT, YOU ARE IN AWE.” And this ends all debate about this subject! And if I am in Awe and am being in that Awe willingly and trustingly, I am the Ultimate Message. And if I am the Ultimate Message, then before Abraham was born, I AM.

Let us explore further this business of being in Awe. If we are not in Awe as we read the Scriptures, we might as well stop reading for we are not understanding correctly a single word. And if we are reading Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Hildegard of Bingen, or Teresa of Avila, or St. John of the Cross, or Martin Luther or John Wesley or Paul Tillich or any other such person, we are also not understanding correctly a single word unless we are experiencing Awe. There are no authorities out there who can tell us what the truth is. There is only One authority--the authority of the Awe that bubbles up within us as we ourselves personally confront the Infinite Silence. It is precisely this Awe that has been called the Holy Spirit. And from whence does the Holy Spirit come? It has been clarified in Christian theology, over and over, that the Holy Spirit flows from the Infinite Silence when the Infinite Silence is trusted. Further, the Holy Spirit also flows from the Singular Offspring. Why? Because trusting the Ultimate Message that the Infinite Silence is trustworthy is at the same time trusting the Infinite Silence.

If we understand what I am saying here, we are understanding a mode of authority that is very different from the modes of authority which I surveyed earlier. I honor the authority of the natural sciences, but this authority is not the same as the authority of the Holy Spirit arising within me. I honor the authority of human reason in all its amazing forms, but this authority is not the same as the authority of Holy Spirit arising within me.

I also honor the authority of Christian scripture, but in this case I want to say most clearly that the authority of these scriptures is a byproduct of the authority of the Holy Spirit arising within me, for unless Holy Spirit is arising within me the authority of the Christian scriptures cannot be experienced by me. Without the Holy Spirit, the Christian scriptures are dead letter--just empty words--empty of Awe. The Spirit alone (that is, Awe) gives life to the Christian scriptures. Any attempt to understand these scriptures as a set of postulates that can give me some sort of rationally objective certitude will fail. The scriptures are written to be nonsense when interpreted in that manner. Only the Spirit gives life to the Christian scriptures.

Now if we are to communicate about these matters with each other we have to say what “Awe” is. We have to say what “Spirit” is. Ironically, we can only say what Awe is to someone who is in Awe. I can define Awe in a simple sentence: Awe is my dread and/or my fascination of the Infinite Silence and my courage to experience these intensities of my life. You, however, do not understand my sentence unless you are experiencing the dread and the fascination and the courage it takes to experience similar intensities. Any communication of these basic understandings about Awe requires that both talker and listener are living in Awe.

So back to the eighth chapter of the gospel of John and the dialogue between Jesus and some religiously trained “dumb-dumbs.” Jesus, in this dialogue, is simply full humanity: Jesus is you or I, when and if we are born of the Spirit, filled with Awe by the Infinite Silence. The religiously trained dumb-dumbs in this story are also you or I, when we are not filled with Awe but are indeed blind to it, resisting it, denying the very existence of our own actual relationship with the Infinite Silence.

Identifying with the children of the evil one

If it seems preposterous to identify with Jesus, it may seem even more preposterous for us to identify with these children of the evil one. In our customary Aweless existence, we do not think of ourselves as evil or as like Jesus. We see ourselves as somewhere in between, not really evil, but then again not really good either. So we may feel that our own personal position is not actually present in this dialogue in the eighth chapter of the Fourth Gospel. Surely, it is too much to ask that we see ourselves as religious dumb-dumbs-- those who think they are religious when they are actually profoundly evil. Who could identify with that position?

However weird such identification may seem, I want you to consider this: unless you can identify with that position, you do not understand a single verse of this chapter. Being a religious dumb-dumb who is totally blind to one's own Spirit being is not an uncommon state of affairs: it is the state of affairs from which every self-aware Spirit person has been reborn. It is the general state of affairs of humanity. If we are indeed a self-aware Spirit person, then we are keenly aware that we face a blind world, a world blind to the Spirit we experience so plainly. So it turns out that this dialogue in the eighth chapter is not an uncommon experience for an awake Spirit person. It is his or her daily experience.

I, in my own experience, am Jesus, the illuminated one, and I am also the blind and evil humanity being illuminated. Can I claim that I am never refusing to trust the Infinite Silence? Can I claim that I am never in despair over my own actual life? Can I claim that I am never suppressing that despair and refusing to experience it? Can I claim that I never desire to kill anyone who tries to expose me to myself? If I am ever in such a state of life, then I am able to identify with the religious dumb-dumbs in this eighth chapter of the Fourth Gospel.

Here is still another horrifying challenge present in this dialogue. Perhaps you are feeling uncomfortable identifying with Jesus when he calls other people "children of the evil one." Surely this is not the way to treat people. Surely this is not love. What compassion can there be in insulting people in such a manner? So let us suppose that this dialogue was written to help us redefine what we mean by "compassion." Let us suppose that "compassion" means delivering people from their blindness into the light of being the Spirit persons they actually are but are not choosing to be. Let us suppose that compassion is enabling a certain humiliation of egoism to happen to people. Let us suppose that there is no easy path from blind evil to illuminated wholeness and that really tough love is the only love that works this transformation. Let us suppose that what we have been calling "compassion" for most of our lives is simply a cowardly indulgence in sentimentality.

Here is the problem beneath the problem beneath the problem of identifying with Jesus in this dialogue: we are cowards. We intuit at some point or other that being this sort of tough love is dangerous. We are going to have rocks hurled at us. Maybe those rocks are no more than very harsh words. Maybe they are bullets. Maybe they are manipulative slanders. Maybe they are loss of status or economic wellbeing. Doing the tough love of Jesus means taking on the rocks. Sometimes we will slip out of the building and avoid the rocks. But in the end, if we persist long and hard enough in challenging the Spirit sicknesses of our era, larger rocks will be more skillfully thrown our way.

So here is the final bottom line of this dialogue: Are we going to be those who hurl the rocks at Jesus or are we going to be Jesus at whom rocks are hurled? There is no "in between."

5. The Man Born Blind

John 9:12-41

As he went on his way, Jesus saw a man blind from his birth. His disciples asked this question, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents? Why was he born blind?”

“It is not that this man or his parents sinned,” Jesus answered; “he was born blind so that the power of the Infinite Silence might be displayed in curing him.”

The writer of the Fourth Gospel begins this chapter by setting up an everyday situation. He makes it sound like he is talking about an ordinary experience of physical blindness. But by now we should be on to this writer. He is setting up a metaphor with which he is going to work on the Spirit dimension of our understanding.

We, each of us, are the man born blind. We are all born blind in the Spirit sense. And no one is to blame for this. Blame, as we shall see, only enters the picture when blind men claim to see. You and I cannot be blamed for being blind, but we can be blamed for claiming that we see. Blindness is a universal state of affairs for which no one is to blame. And this universal blindness has this strange purpose: that the power of the Infinite Silence might be displayed in bringing Light to the blind.

In this elemental sense, Spiritual blindness means nothing more nor less than being a human animal who has not yet been filled with Awe. When Awe happens, the power of Infinite Silence is being displayed. With these thoughts in mind, let us continue with our story.

“While daylight lasts we must carry on the work of the Infinite Silence who sent me; night comes, when no one can work. While I am in the blind world, I am the Light of the world.”

With these words, he spat on the ground and made a paste with the spittle; he spread it on the man’s eyes and said to him, “Go and wash in the pool of Siloam.” (The name means “sent.”) The man went away and washed, and when he returned he could see.

Now let us observe the metaphors working here. Jesus, the one SENT by the Infinite Silence, puts “spit mud” on a blind man’s eyes and SENDS him to go wash in the pool of SENT. Let us not overlook these slightly veiled meanings: only those who are SENT by the Infinite Silence can SEE, spiritually speaking. And this is a universal dynamic of the Spirit dimension: someone who has SIGHT from being SENT by the Infinite Silence, SENDS others to wash away their blindness in the pool of SENT (sent by the Infinite Silence). The Infinite Silence and the Infinite Silence alone SENDS us--that is, fills us with Awe, fills us with Spirit. If we are not SENT by the Infinite Silence we have no Awe, no Spirit, we are just another wondrous creature like my cat or your dog or any garden earthworm. We are here, but we have no SIGHT, no Spirit awareness. We are born blind.

Let us continue with our story:

His neighbors and those who were accustomed to see him begging said, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Others said, “Yes, this is the man.” Others again said, “No, but it is someone like him.”

The man himself said, “I am the man.”

They asked him, “How were your eyes opened?”

He replied, “The man called Jesus made a paste and smeared my eyes with it, and told me to go to Siloam and wash. I went and washed, and gained my sight.”

“Where is he?” they asked.

He answered, “I do not know.”

If you or I have ever been through a profound change in which we were indeed awakened to our actual Spirit lives, we can identify easily with the man in this story. Our friends ask us, “Are you the same Gene Marshall we used to know or just someone very much like him.” “I am the man. I am the very same man except that now I see whereas before I was blind.”

“Well, how did this happen to you?” they ask. “Well,” says I, “I went to this particular lecture and heard this particular person and then I took this particular path and encountered this particular thing and now I see.” “Well,” they ask, “Where is this particular person, now?” “I do not know,” says I.

It is clear that an awakened blind man does not need to have the person who awakened him continue to stand there holding his hand. The Infinite Silence is giving us our sight, not Jesus, not some contemporary philosopher, theologian, preacher, guru, or friend. When the Infinite Silence gives us Light, we see. Any particular finite medium through which that Sight has come to us is no longer needed. Even more remarkable, we who Spiritually See are now the medium that is challenging others to See. The next lines of the story make this point:

The man that had been blind was brought before the religious authorities. As it was the Sabbath day when Jesus made the paste and opened his eyes, the religious authorities now asked him by what means he had gained his sight.

The man told them, “He spread a paste on my eyes; then I washed, and now I see.”

Some of the religious authorities said, “This fellow is no servant of the Infinite Silence, he does not keep the Sabbath. Others said, “How could such signs come from a sinful man?” So they took different sides. Then they continued to question him: “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

He answered, “He is a prophet.”

In other words, the man born blind said that he perceived that Jesus was a Spirit person, a servant of the Infinite Silence. The use of this term “prophet” makes clear that the author of this gospel is not talking about mere physical doctoring or mere wonder working. The real subject here is Spirit healing. The religious authorities did not want to hear the answer given by the man born blind. They were not really interested in his actual experience, they were hoping for some confirmation of the authoritarian views in which they had invested their lives and with which they were tyrannizing others. So here is what they do in the following verses:

The religiously trained people would not believe that the man had been blind and had gained his sight, until they had summoned his parents and questioned them: “Is this man your son? Do you say that he was born blind? How is it that he can now see?”

The parents replied, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind. But how it is that he can now see, or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age; he will speak for himself.” (His parents gave this answer because they were afraid of the religiously trained people, for the religious authorities had already agreed that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah should be banned from the synagogue. That is why the parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”)

Now as we continue reading this story, let us keep in mind that while this story is being told as a story on the physical level, we also are being confronted with a metaphorical story about the Spirit life. Each of us is born blind, Spiritually speaking. And when we come to see, Spiritually speaking, our parents cannot answer for us and the religious authorities cannot intimidate us. If I can see, I know whether I can see or not, and this sight is incontestable. In our story, the religiously trained folk and their authorities do not wish to acknowledge such incontestability.

So for the second time they summoned the man who had been blind and said, “Speak the truth before the Infinite Silence. We know that this fellow is a sinner.”

“Whether or not he is a sinner, I do not know,” the man replied. “All I know is this: once I was blind, now I see.”

“What did he do to you?” they asked. “How did he open your eyes?”

“I have told you already,” he retorted, “but you took no notice. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”

Then they became abusive. “You are that man’s disciple,” they said, “but we are disciples of Moses. We know that the Infinite Silence spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we do not know where he comes from.”

The man replied, “What an extraordinary thing! Here is a man who has opened my eyes, yet you do not know where he comes from! It is common knowledge that the Infinite Silence does not listen to people whose living is off the mark. The Infinite Silence listens to anyone who is sincere and obeys the Infinite Silence. To open the eyes of a man born blind--it is unheard of since time began. If that man had not come from the Infinite Silence, he could have done nothing.”

“Who are you to give us lessons,” they retorted, “born and bred in sin as you are.” Then they expelled him from the synagogue.

It is amazing to me how contemporary this story is. Throughout the established bodies of Christianity and many other religions, the religious authorities and those trained by them reject the authority (that is, the authenticity) of those who speak from their own experience. Furthermore, those who, in their own experience, have been awakened to the Spirit reality of their own lives are equipped by that experience to give lessons to the religious authorities. And these lessons are not given by becoming religious scholars, but by speaking from actual experience. There is nothing wrong with being a religious scholar, but a religious scholar who does not operate from his or her own experience has no understanding whatsoever of the religious subject matter he or she claims to teach. Such teaching is just words bouncing around inside the brain boxes of speaker and listener.

The author of the Gospel of John is clearly a religious scholar, but his fantastic tales about

Jesus are directed toward a major mistake made by many religious scholars and by many religious people. The direct experience of Awe is the only authority a religious teacher has and being in Awe is the only way that a religious student can hear what such a teacher is saying. Furthermore, to whatever extent I am grasped by direct experiences of Awe, I am a witness, an incontestable witness to those experiences. I can teach religion if I have experienced Awe.

So, what is Awe? Here again, mere words do not suffice. I will state again my general statements describing Awe, but I ask the reader to remember that my mere words will mean nothing to the person who has not experienced Awe. Awe is a direct encounter with the Infinite Silence in which I am filled with dread, fascination, and the courage to live those intensities. Awe includes a willingness to be in Awe. Without this willingness, Awe is not Awe: it is despair. The willingness to be in Awe is called faith or trust and this trust of the Infinite Silence leads to freedom and to compassion for all beings. So Awe is also freedom and compassion as well as tranquility, joy, equanimity, courage, and other such states of being. And to be in any of these states of Awe, Awe must be chosen. Yet even when chosen, Awe remains a gift not an accomplishment. If I choose to reject the gift of Awe, then I enter into a sick Spirit state called "despair." How do I know these dynamics are so? Because I have experienced them. I was born blind, but now I see.

Note that I have used in my definitions of Awe some *power words*: such as: the Infinite Silence; dread, fascination, and courage; trust, freedom and compassion; and despair. For my sentences to make sense, each of these words have to be clarified for you in your actual experience. If you have never been in dread, you cannot understand me when I talk about dread from my own experience. And if you have never experienced openly your own deep despair, you cannot understand me when I talk about despair in my own experience. Further, if you have not paid attention to your own interior experience with sufficient intensity to hook together the experiences I am pointing to with these *power words*, then my way of hooking these words together will be cryptic to you. To understand me, you will have to ask me what I mean by each word and why I hook it with the other *power words* in the manner I do. And to understand whether or not what I say is true, you will have to look into your own experience to see there the truth or untruth of what I am saying.

And if you discover that you do not see, you need to know that there is no dishonor in being blind on Spirit matters. We are all born blind. But there is dishonor in our being dishonest about whether or not we can see. The conclusion of the ninth chapter of the Fourth Gospel works on this theme:

Jesus heard that they had expelled him. When he found him he asked, "Have you trust in the Authentic Human Being?"

The man answered, "Tell me who he is, sir, that I should put my trust in him."

"You have seen him," said Jesus, "indeed, it is he who is speaking to you now."

"I trust you, Master," he said, and bowed before him.

Jesus said, "It is for judgment that I have come into this blind world--to give sight to the sightless and to make blind those who see."

Some religious authorities in his company asked, "Do you mean that we are blind?"

"If you were blind," said Jesus, "you would not be guilty, but because you say 'We see', your guilt remains."

If we attempt to understand these paradoxes on sight and blindness in a literal physical manner, they are nonsense. Even if we attempt to understand them as speaking of rational clarity, they are nonsense. The gospel writer, through his Jesus figure, is speaking of Spirit clarity, and only in this dimension of experience do these statements ring true.

So let us hear it all again: there is no blame for being spiritually blind. All of us are born blind. All of us start our lives in the dark, Spiritually speaking. And as we wake up, we see that we were blind and that we are still blind in many areas. If, instead of confessing the blindness we experience, we pretend to see what we do not indeed see, then guilt enters the picture. And, of course, guilt has entered the picture in every life. All of us have fled from our own blindness on Spirit matters. Such fleeing is a pretense that we see what we do not see.

Here is a simple example. A man is jilted by the woman he loves. She claims that he is insensitive to her. He claims that he does not care, that he did not really love her anyhow. "She is too demanding. Good riddance." But the man does not rest well at night. He does not focus well on his work. He just mopes about in a sort of daze.

We can see that this man is blind to what has happened to him. He is not to blame for being an insensitive person. He is not to blame for the woman leaving him. He is not to blame for being in grief. But he is to blame for denying his grief, for claiming that he does not care. He lies. He has fled into a pretense that he sees what he does not see.

The path to Reality for this man is to admit his grief and his flight from it--to admit his real situation and all his confusion about it. If he does this, he sees. If he does not, he only pretends to see.

For this man to lose the woman he loves could be an Awe-filled moment, a moment of Spirit awakening. But for the depths of Spirit to emerge in that moment of experience, the man must admit what is actually happening.

In the stories of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is the character who represents the human being who does see. Jesus sees who is blind and he also sees who sees. And when such a Jesus-figure comes into our lives as a living presence, our true state of affairs is revealed.

Let us imagine that some Jesus-quality friend comes into the life of the man in my story. This sensitive friend might ask some questions: Are you not in grief over your loss? Are you telling the truth when you say that you do not care? Or this friend might say "It is understandable that you are moping about in a daze. It is not necessary that you pull yourself together. At this moment, your grief is your true experience. Yes, the Infinite Silence has sent you a period of grief. Look, there is mud in your eyes, go and wash out your eyes in the pool of SENT by the Infinite Silence."

To the blind who are willing to confess their blindness, Jesus brings the illumination that we are indeed blind, that such blindness has no guilt, and that Sight is a matter of being honest about the actual experience of our lives. Living in the Light is simply being honest about what we see and what we don't see. We never arrive at some state of ultimate consciousness. In our consciousness, as well as all else, we are finite beings. No matter how conscious we become, there is always an infinite distance yet to go. But when Jesus, the illuminated human being stands before us, the Light comes immediately. And what do we see? We see where we are blind and we see what we see. And we can also see the Ultimate Message: we can see that our seeing and our blindness are both guiltless; we can see that we need only trust that both sight and blindness are SENT by the Infinite Silence who loves us.

To those who claim to see what they do not see, Jesus, the illuminated one, enters their lives as an audit of their self deception. The same Ultimate Message that brings liberation to the blind, brings blindness to those who pretend to see. Such blindness has no guilt, but guilt does remain if we continue in the illusion-making insistence that we see what we do not see. If we who pretend to see are to genuinely see, we must become blind--that is, we must become the blindness we actually are.

So, if we are honest, each of us can identify with the man born blind. Each of us need to submit to having some sort of silly mud smeared on our eyes and then to washing it off in the pool of "Sent by the Infinite Silence." If we do this, we will discover the actual Awe of our lives, the Awe instilled in us by the Infinite Silence who sends all Awe. We will know ourselves as Spiritually awake. And the Spiritually awake, by living openly their awakenment, become Light to others. Indeed, the author of the Fourth Gospel gives the Spiritually awake person permission to identify with Jesus, the Ultimate Message, the illuminated one, the Light of the world.

6. The Good Shepherd

John 10:1-21

Before reading and reflecting on sections of this chapter, we need to remind ourselves of some basic ground rules for understanding the words of the Fourth Gospel. This is literature, metaphorical writing. We are not dealing with a speech that the historical Jesus actually made. And the author of this gospel knew this, and the earliest listeners to this gospel also knew this.

Secondly, we must remember that the Jesus figure in this gospel means two things: (1) the Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence, and (2) an ordinary human being with whom we can entirely identify. When I say “entirely identify,” I am aware that this Jesus figure is drawn to picture our fully authentic humanness and that none of us can truthfully claim to always live our lives in a fully authentic manner. Certainly, I cannot make that claim. Nevertheless, it is true that in my basic essence and in my actual potentiality, Jesus and I are the same person. The same is true for you.

These statements, I realize, are contradictory to the popular “pedestal theology” of many Christian theologians. There are two ways such theologians put Jesus on a pedestal: (1) making him into some sort of divine being who thereby fails to be entirely human, and (2) making him into some sort of “ideal human”--a goal toward which we can constantly strive but a goal we will never reach. But Jesus is not a goal, Jesus is the real me, the me I am failing to be and perhaps refusing to be. I can “entirely identify” with the Jesus figure in John’s gospel because “being Jesus” means “being myself.” So while Jesus is a challenging figure that comes to meet me, Jesus is also my true self, my complete self, my authentic self, the self who is willing to live my actual relationship with the Infinite Silence.

Astonishing as this may seem to our self-deprecating and cowardly egos, being my Jesus-self includes being the Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence. In this tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, being my Jesus-self means being the Good Shepherd. This chapter is incomprehensible unless we see that the author of this chapter is challenging each of us to be the Good Shepherd. If you or I do not understand how it is possible for you and for me to be the Good Shepherd, then we do not understand how Jesus was or is the Good Shepherd. As the chapter begins, Jesus--the authentic me and the authentic you--is speaking:

“In truth I tell you, in complete truth, the person who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in some other way is nothing but a thief or a robber. The person who enters by the door is the shepherd in charge of the sheep. The door-keeper admits that person and the sheep hear the voice of that person. The shepherd calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When the shepherd has brought them all out, the shepherd goes in front and the sheep follow, because they know the shepherd’s voice. They do not follow a stranger; they will run away from a stranger, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.”

This was a parable that Jesus told the religiously trained folk, but they did not understand what he meant.

So Jesus spoke again, “In truth, in complete truth, I tell you, I am the door of the sheepfold. The sheep paid no heed to any who came before me, for these were all thieves and robbers. I am the door; anyone who comes into the fold through me shall be safe. That person shall go in and out and shall find pasturage.

The thief comes only to steal, to kill, to destroy; I have come that human beings may have life and may have it in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his (or her) life for the sheep. The hireling, when he (or she) sees the wolf coming, abandons the sheep and runs away, because she is no shepherd and the sheep are not hers. Then the wolf harries the flock and scatters the sheep. The hireling runs away because she is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep.”

Now to grasp the richness of this metaphorical writing, we have to shake out of our minds some modern images about sheep and shepherds. Being “sheep” in modern parlance usually means being passive, non-thinking persons who blindly follow some established trend or some authoritarian or charismatic leader. This is not what it means to be the sheep in the above verses. These sheep are those who are members of the true fold--the fold of authenticity, the fold of the Infinite Silence. To be one of these sheep means to be cared for by the Good Shepherd, to find pasturage, to go in and out safely, to be protected from the wolf.

And who is the wolf in this metaphorical tale? Well, the wolf is the evil one, the tempter, the leader who seeks to lead us astray and thus seeks to kill our authentic life.

And who is the hireling? The hireling is the religious leader who will not lay down his life for the sheep, but flees when the wolf comes.

And who is the Good Shepherd? Often when Christian priests and pastors talk about being shepherds of their flocks, they mean doing people’s religious thinking for them--even intimidating people into accepting the “herd beliefs” of their particular religious group. Such a shepherd is indeed making “passive sheep” out of his or her flock. But the Good Shepherd, wonder of wonders, enables each sheep to become his or her own self. And as the sheep become themselves, they also become the Good Shepherd. Strange biology indeed, but profound Spirit thinking.

But before a sheep becomes the Good Shepherd, that sheep first experiences being cared for by the Good Shepherd. In order to understand this care, we need to see in our mind’s eye the relationship of care and intimacy manifest between an ancient sheep herder and his sheep. The sheep need water and pasturage and protection in order to have life. The shepherd watches after these needs day and night. And the shepherd knows each sheep; the Fourth Gospel is not using the imagery of mass-production animal husbandry.

In applying this ancient metaphor to human interactions, the gospel writer is assuming that everyone follows some “shepherd”--that each of us follows some “lead” with regard to living life properly. So the question is: “Whose sheep shall we be? What lead shall we follow? Who is the ‘good’ shepherd, and who is the ‘bad’ pretender to good shepherdhood?”

The writer of this gospel is intent on making clear to us that “The Ultimate Message embodied in human flesh” is the Good Shepherd. And, again, what is this Ultimate Message? That the Infinite Silence loves us! And what is this love? “Love” in this context means that the real life we are being given by the Infinite Silence is good for us! That having the very neighbors we do indeed have--our friends and our enemies--is life and life abundant! The sign that we are accepting this Message is that we are in return loving the Infinite Silence and all the friends and enemies sent to us by the Infinite Silence. And what does it mean for us to love our friends and enemies? It does not mean conjuring up feelings we don’t already have. It simply means affirming our friends and enemies as parts of the great gift of our lives and witnessing to them that each of them can do the same. Living in such trust of Infinite Love and thus loving without reservation every friend and every enemy makes us members of the true flock.

And the Good Shepherd of this true flock is anyone who is trusted by the true flock. The true

flock knows who is the Good Shepherd--knows who can be counted upon. Other leaders might claim to be good shepherds of the true flock, but they are thieves and robbers, or hirelings who run when trouble comes. The true shepherd speaks with a voice that is recognized by the sheep and the sheep follow because they know that they will eat and drink and have abundant life following this shepherd. And with regard to protection when trouble comes, the good shepherd, in this parable, boundlessly exceeds ordinary shepherding: "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep!"

And what does laying down life for the sheep mean? Let us not assume too quickly that we know. I will return to this question in the last section of this chapter.

Spirit Sheep and Spirit Shepherd

If we are to understand the intent of the author of the Fourth Gospel, we must constantly avoid any sort of literalism: we must interpret all this metaphorical writing in relation to the Spirit dimension of human living. Doing this is not so easy, for the established trends in our cultural era do not clearly understand and celebrate the existence of a Spirit dimension in human living. So let us ask once again what Spirit is? We are seeing Spirit when we see that being a fully authentic human being entails living all four of these aspects of human life: (1) the flux of finite beings that surround us, (2) the Infinite Silence that shines through that flux, (3) the interior flux of finite thoughts, feelings, and choices, and (4) the interior experience of an Awe-filled relationship with the Infinite Silence. Contemporary culture emphasizes (1) and (3) to the point of ignoring and even denying (2) and (4).

Even though I have said what I mean by (2) and (4) in every chapter of this book and in most other books I have written, I find it necessary, in each of these discourses, to find fresh ways to say all over again what I mean by "Awe" and "the Infinite." In our times, we are afflicted with a pathological forgetfulness about Spirit matters. So what is Awe? Where in our lives do we experience a relationship with the Infinite? Can I assume that you, the readers, can easily answer such questions? No, I can't.

The full nature of Awe is watered down in almost every religious community and almost every secular discussion group. This is what we commonly do: we rob Awe of its Infinite dimension. When we say something is "awesome," we usually mean that it is right up there with knocking 60 home runs in a single season. The same reduction of "Awe" to the finite dimension takes place in our religious practices. Our religious teachings, instead of being Great Thinks that dread and fascinate and challenge us to courageous living, become mere rational beliefs that battle with other rational beliefs in a futile effort to make sense of human life. And our so-called "religious feelings," instead of being Great Feels that mark the presence of the Infinite Silence, become passing expressions of finite sentimentality. And thirdly, our so-called "moral fiber," instead of being Great Resolves rooted in an obedient relationship to the Infinite, become moralistic teachings with which we deal out deadly guilt to ourselves and others.

True Awe is actually happening all the time, yet we deny its existence or at least its importance. All around us we see death happening, but we do not experience and celebrate the Awe of death. All around us we see birth happening, but we do not experience and celebrate the Awe of birth. What I mean is: we do not choose to notice or give importance to the fact that we are not in control of the flow of our lives or of cosmic history. We may notice the loveliness of a full moon rising orange in the east, but we do not look through that moon into the face of the Infinite: we do not see a boundless Otherness confronting us and demanding our response. And so we do not even raise the question of whether or not this Infinite Otherness loves us. This is the establishmentarian view within modern culture: we ignore the Infinite. We ignore Awe; we

ignore everything that is not simply part of the flux of finite events.

When tribal people ritually greeted the sun each morning, they did so because they had a sense of Awe for the new day, for the return of warmth and light. But most know-it-all, civilized moderns seldom view the sun at all. A furiously hot atomic furnace 93,000 miles away from us might be Awesome to us, but we pass it off as just one more finite process. We find it hard to see the sun as a mask on the face of the Infinite. Indeed, for us, in the general round of our lives, there is no Infinite, there is no Source of Awe, there is no Spirit in our lives.

So our lives are reduced to working at finite jobs to earn finite monetary power in order to spend it for finite possessions and pleasures. And our talk is not about Spirit, but about the latest weather, sports events, soap operas, computer gadgetry, and perhaps religious beliefs. Indeed, our religious talk is the most deadening talk of all, for we tend to view the wondrous and vast religious heritages of the human species as nothing more than expressions of ordinary finite feelings, finite thoughts, and finite moral options. The Infinite Silence is in eclipse--hidden behind an overabundance of enthrallment with finite things.

There also exists within modern culture a disestablishment view that is equally insidious. Rather than being enthralled with the finite, the disestablishment view is enthralled with escaping from the finite. One formulation of this view claims that we have an "immortal soul," and that this "soul" is the real content of our lives. Everything else is unreal or of secondary reality. We, according to this view, are each an immortal something trapped here in these passing bodies, these passing circumstances, these unimportant events of births and deaths, of thoughts and feelings. In this view, there is no Infinite Otherness confronting us in the finite course of events: there is only the soul, helped perhaps by some friendly god (perhaps by both gods and goddesses) who somehow "live" in some other realm removed from the finite course of events. The end result of living our lives within such a viewpoint is that we take the finite realm of existence unseriously and even hold it in contempt. We see finitude not as the place where the Awe-filling Infinite Silence is being met. We see finitude as a basically meaningless thing to be controlled by our immortal spirit power. Some supercharged mystical charlatans even claim that the characteristics of our finite lives are something which we are ourselves are creating by our immortal spirit power.

So the modern era seems to present us with these two insidious options: (1) contempt of the Infinite or (2) contempt of the finite. These options are being offered by false shepherds. Such messengers are thieves and robbers who come to eat the sheep. Such messengers are the cowardly hirelings who flee when the wolf comes. Indeed, such messengers are the wolf that comes to harass the true sheep.

So, who is the Good Shepherd? Who is the true leader of the true flock of authentic humanness? The Good Shepherd is the fleshly embodiment of the Ultimate Message. And what is this Ultimate Message? That there is an Infinite Silence behind every rock tree, animal, situation, or event and that this Infinite Silence loves you and me and everyone! This Ultimate Message confronts you in the finite flesh of some real human being who is standing before you and living this Message. In the literary context of the Fourth Gospel, this Ultimate Message, embodied in finite flesh, is called by this name: Jesus.

Buddhism has often spoken of itself as a middle way between asceticism and worldly indulgence. The Jesus-dynamic is also a middle way between contempt of the finite and contempt of the Infinite. "Jesus" means the full affirmation of both the Infinite and the finite. "Jesus" means the Infinite Silence speaking to us in the finite flesh of an actual human presence. But "Jesus" does not simply mean an historical figure in the first century, though that historical personage, Jesus of Nazareth, is gathered up into the symbolism of this Fourth Gospel as well as the other three gospels. In the Fourth Gospel, "Jesus" clearly means a dynamic that came into

being with the entire cosmos, a life that existed before Abraham, a life that exists after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, a life that will stand in judgment upon each and every human being at the end of time. “Jesus” means the Ultimate Message. “Jesus” means the very essence of human living for which this species came into being. “Jesus” means the Good Shepherd of the true flock of human authenticity.

Jesus, Sally, You and I

Now, where can we actually experience this Good Shepherd in our lives today? Let me answer this with a fictitious story, but a story made out of my own experience. In my story, Sally McGillicutty teaches an adult class in the Sunflower room of the Umpity Ump Christian Church. Sally believes the Ultimate Message that the Infinite Silence loves Sally and every other person (and creature) on this planet or any other planet. Because of this trust in the Infinite Silence (the Infinite Silence who is giving Sally every element in her life), Sally is herself an embodiment of the Ultimate Message. When Sally walks into the room, the Ultimate Message walks into the room. When Sally speaks, the Infinite Silence speaks the Ultimate Message. When Sally notices the despairing living going on her class, that despairing living knows itself noticed by the Infinite Silence, audited by the Infinite Silence, forgiven by the Infinite Silence, and called by the Infinite Silence to a free, trusting, compassionate, tranquil sort of living. Sally constantly confronts each member of her class with the option of living human life in victorious freedom. She challenges her class to live in freedom those very same lives over which each of her class members quite commonly despairs.

The men in her class who feel they have no feelings worth expressing learn to do so; they learn that every anger, every fear, every hostility, every compassion, every bodily desire, is part of the goodness of life. The women in her class (most of whom always thought that being nice was the one thing that a proper women should do) learn from Sally that being firm and ruthlessly honest is the sort of aliveness approved by the cosmos. The parents in her class (most of whom walk in despondency over the thought that they are to blame for every failure or flaw in their offspring) learn from Sally to realize that each of their children are virgin born, offspring of the Infinite Silence--that children are strange and mysterious beings who must do their own despairing, failures, depravities, as well as find their own buoyant living and astonishing novelties. “Parents,” Sally says, “who love, feed, and protect their children from injury, are doing their job.” “And loving them fully,” she says, “includes allowing them the freedom and the dignity of going to hell in their own way.” “Maybe,” Sally says, “you might pray without ceasing that your children will find trust in the Infinite Silence, but if they don’t, it’s not your fault.” In these and many other ways, Sally is the Ultimate Message in human flesh. Sally is Jesus to this particular flock who come each week to probe with Sally into the secrets of living life in an ongoing trust of the Infinite Silence. Sally is the Good Shepherd. Before Abraham was born, Sally IS.

Now, Sally has not been appreciated by every person who has attended her class. Some left in a huff and never returned. One particular official in the church sought to have her class disbanded. “A disgrace,” he called it. But Sally believes that such opposition is to be expected. She even uses this opposition to teach her point that we live in a world of darkness that opposes the light. And as to her own inconvenience and grief over being opposed in these ways, Sally says, “The Good Shepherd lays down her life for her sheep.”

Now my story might have taken place in some other environment than a church. Sally could have been a teacher of secular wisdom or a teacher of Buddhism or not even a teacher at all. For the Jesus-dynamic, since it is the Ultimate Message of the Infinite Silence, is not limited to communication within the context of Christian churches or even Christian symbolism. Any

person who communicates in any way whatsoever that we are loved by the Infinite Silence is a fleshly embodiment of the Ultimate Message. That person can be said to be “in Jesus.” That person is living “in the name Jesus.” Indeed that person, insofar as he or she actually embodies the Ultimate Message, is Jesus!

And let me clarify once again that there are Spirit persons who do not call themselves by the name “Jesus.” It is only those of us who use and understand the Jesus-language who can call Sally McGillicutty or some Buddhist teacher, or some secular writer by the name, “Jesus.” We can do so because we see that a genuine Spirit person, whatever name they prefer, can also be included, as far as we are concerned, within the name, “Jesus.” The true flock know their Shepherd wherever and whenever that Shepherd shows up.

The author of the Fourth Gospel fully realized this universality of the Jesus-dynamic. In this next section of this tenth chapter we find this universality explicitly expressed.

There are Other Sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me--just as the Infinite Parent knows me and I know the Infinite Parent. I lay down my life for the sheep.

And there are other sheep of mine, not belonging to this fold, whom I must bring in; and they too will hear my voice. There will be one flock, one shepherd.

In the strict context of the gospel narrative, the phrase “this fold” pointed to a group of mostly Jewish people who trusted in Jesus as the Ultimate Message. In other words, “this fold” means whatever group we assume were being spoken to by the Jesus figure in this story. So it is not incorrect for us to apply “this fold” to some contemporary self-consciously Christian group--whatever group we think really do trust Jesus. But here is the kicker: whatever group we, who call ourselves Christians, might view as the “in-group” where the Jesus-dynamic is surely operating, Jesus in this narrative is saying to us that there are still “other sheep . . . not belonging to this fold.”

If we think that all the sheep of Jesus are Roman Catholics, or Protestants or even some narrower band of humanity, we are not yet hearing this verse. There are still “other sheep . . . not belonging to this fold.” If we think that only those who call themselves Christians can be called the sheep of Jesus, we are not yet hearing this verse. There are still “other sheep . . . not belonging to this fold.”

Each of us must decide for ourselves if the message that the Infinite Silence loves us is indeed the Ultimate Message. And if it is the Ultimate Message, it is not the Ultimate Message because Christian teaching says it is. It is the Ultimate Message because it is the Ultimate Message. And if it is the Ultimate Message, it is the Ultimate Message for every authentic person, no matter who or where or through what teacher this authenticity was born.

Further, let me clarify once again that there are just two alternatives to this Ultimate Message. All the alternatives to the Ultimate Message can be clumped into these two buckets: (1) hating the Infinite in an attempt to love the finite, and (2) hating the finite in an attempt to love the Infinite. The Ultimate Message is neither of these: the Ultimate Message says that the Infinite loves me in all my finitude and in all my relatedness to the Infinite. And if I receive this Message as the Ultimate Message about human life--about every human life, then flowing from this trust will be a love or affirmation within me for every finite reality and for the Infinite which

gives, sustains, limits, and ends every finite reality. I either trust the Infinite Silence or I mistrust the Infinite Silence. And if I mistrust the Infinite Silence, then I am in despair over the fact that I am an inescapable relationship with the Infinite Silence. Or perhaps I am in despair over the fact that the Infinite Silence has commanded me to be a finite being rather than an immortal soul who can hold finitude in contempt. And if I am in despair over either my finitude or my Awe-filled relationship with the Infinite, then I am not hearing the Ultimate Message. I am in the dark. I am not a member of the true flock, and Jesus is not my shepherd.

But if I do trust this Ultimate Message and if such trust is my fundamental life response, then I am a member of the true flock, and Jesus is my shepherd even if I have never in my life heard of Jesus, or of Christianity, or of any talk of true flocks and good shepherds.

Laying Down Life and Receiving it Back Again

Finally, let us hear these next few words spoken by the Jesus figure in the tenth chapter of the Fourth Gospel:

“The Infinite Parent loves me because I lay down my life, to receive it back again. No one has robbed me of my life; I am laying it down of my own free will. I have the privilege of laying my life down, and I have the privilege to receive it back again. This capacity I have received from my Infinite Parent.”

Crucifixion and resurrection are both experiences of being loved by the Infinite Silence. If we are not willing to lay our lives down and receive them back again, then we are not experiencing love from the Infinite Silence. The freedom to willingly die and willingly live on the other side of having died is our capacity for trusting in the love of the Infinite Silence. The Infinite Silence is always requiring of us the death of our ego-existence. If we are not willing to die these deaths of our own free will, then we hate the Infinite Silence. We do not trust the Infinite Silence because we are expecting something from the Infinite Silence that will never be delivered. But what will always be delivered is liberation from our ego-bondages. If we see this as love, then we can willingly die our ego-deaths. If we are not willing to die our ego-deaths, then we do not see what is happening to us as love. But if we are willing to die, then we are also capable of receiving our lives back again, lives from which we are now deeply detached, but lives which we can also live in all their finite glory and in all their inescapable relatedness to the Infinite Silence.

Yes, the Jesus-way is a middle way. It is not an indulgence in finitude to the hatred of the Infinite, and it is not a hatred of our finite lives. The Jesus-way is the way of trust in Infinite love. If we trust, then we are willing to lay down each day our specific finite relationships and receive them back again. The Jesus-way is a perpetual willingness to die (to lay down our finite lives of our own free will) and to receive back again the very finite lives we have already laid down. Such a walk is the walk of the Good Shepherd, and the true sheep know this walk, hear this voice, follow this lead.

7. Resurrection Now

John 11:1-44

The eleventh chapter of the Fourth Gospel contains the story of Lazarus who in this story is called by Jesus out of the tomb after having been in there four days and begun to stink.

Now like the story of the man born blind, this story, a story about a man who has died, is a metaphorical tale. We don't need to know whether or not there ever was a man named Lazarus who was the brother of Mary and Martha. We don't need to know whether or not this man Lazarus really died and was brought back to life by Jesus. And do we really care whether or not some first century man was brought back to life to live a while longer before he did go ahead and die and stay dead?

Why have so many Christian-identified people opted for a literal understanding of this tale? Some "Christian" thought has used the "miracles" to prove that Jesus was indeed "the Son of God." They have reasoned that since only the Son of God could raise the dead, Jesus was the Son of God. Such "proofs" are thought to make it easier to believe that Jesus was indeed this very special person and that "belief" in him will thus assure us of an immortality of a pleasant sort. Such thinking seldom makes any effort to actually clarify the term "the Son of God." We are left to assume that this term means something so obvious that no detailed thought is needed. "The Son of God" is simply assumed to mean a literal Divine Being whose origin is in a literal supernatural world. Such thought is also unclear about the term "belief." And thirdly, such thought does not take notice that the concept of "a naturally immortal soul" has been imported into the Gospel of John. "Resurrection" is this author's metaphor, not "immortality." It is nowhere the logic of the Fourth Gospel that Jesus' raising of a first century man from the dead has some relationship to our being immortal and that believing that Jesus could literally do this has a relation to our best immortal destiny. Such thinking is not only gibberish, it is unbiblical.

Literalistic thought is not only an unnecessary offense to modern intelligence, it also prevents us from understanding the biblical authors. Clearly, we must learn to think metaphorically in order to understand the Fourth Gospel. Again and again, this author tells us an attention-getting tale that can be understood in a mundane way but which only makes full sense when related to the Spirit dimension of our experience. In each chapter, this author asks the reader to make a leap into Spirit perception. And by "Spirit," remember, we mean our Awe-filled relationship with the Infinite Silence. So, keeping this method clearly in mind let us listen afresh to what the author of the Fourth Gospel is actually trying to communicate with this story of Lazarus.

Lazarus is a person who has been a believer in Jesus. He is a friend, the brother of Mary and Martha who are also believers, also friends, members of some "Jesus club" over there in Bethany. We might even say that Lazarus is a fictitious figure who represents the entire Christian community in Bethany--or in some other particular place: Brownsboro, Texas, or perhaps the very community in which you are now living.

At any rate, Lazarus had been Spiritually alive (a friend of Jesus), but he had become ill and died. Jesus did not go over there at first, but let Lazarus lie there in the tomb of Spiritual corruption for longer than three days, indeed four days. In ancient custom, a person can stay three days in someone's home and be considered a visitor. After three days, they become a resident. So Lazarus had become a resident in the home of Spirit death and his life had begun to stink before Jesus got over there to his tomb. Everyone except Jesus had given up hope for this

man (or this congregation). They discouraged Jesus from even opening up the tomb. Yuck, this will be a real nasty sort of thing.

But Jesus opened up the tomb and called out in a LOUD VOICE to this stinking mess of humanity, "Lazarus, COME OUT." And, lo and behold, the situation was not hopeless after all. The stinking dead thing stood up and walked out of there. Jesus said, "Take all those dirty grave wraps off of him and let him go."

Now, if you are moved by this story it may be that you yourself have been in such a hopeless grave and have indeed somehow come out. Or perhaps you have known or still know some body of people who are even now spiritually dead and upon whom you have given up all hope. Perhaps you are needing a little encouragement that one might indeed go into that awful stinking situation and call out in a LOUD VOICE and something significant would take place.

With this overall drama in mind, let us turn to some of the specific words of this chapter:

Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here, sir, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask of the Infinite Silence, the Infinite Silence will grant you."

Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again."

"I know he will rise again," said Martha, "at the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection. If any person has trust in me, even though he die, he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has trust shall ever die. Do you believe this?"

"Lord, I do," she answered; "I now believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world."

It is plain that the Martha figure in this dialogue is using words, the full meaning of which she does not know. She is functioning here as another of the gospel writer's confused "believers." Her confusions are further revealed when Jesus asks for the stone to be removed from the tomb and she attempts to stop him with these words, **"Sir, by now there will be a stench; he has been in there four days."**

Martha, like most of us, does not grasp that "resurrection" is something for the here and now. She seems to accept the popular myth that Lazarus will rise again at the resurrection on the last day, but she does not really fathom the words of Jesus that indicate that resurrection can happen NOW. Right NOW any authentic human being is the RESURRECTION.

So, what does it mean to say that Jesus is the RESURRECTION? To answer this question, we have to grasp the possibility that right HERE and right NOW you or I can also be the RESURRECTION. The RESURRECTION is human authenticity, and we do not have to wait until the end of time to experience it. RESURRECTION walks up to us in the present moment and calls to us in a LOUD VOICE, "Gene, Karl, Alice, Alberto, Marilyn, Sonia, COME OUT of your tomb. COME OUT of that stinky fallen life that most people consider to be a hopeless case."

When the author of the Fourth Gospel has Jesus weep, sigh heavily, and be deeply grieved, the Spiritually perceptive reader is supposed to see that Jesus is weeping over the Spirit condition of this group of people. Some of the bystanders in this story misunderstand Jesus. They say,

“How dearly he must have loved him.” They think he is grieving over the final death or loss of Lazarus. But no, Jesus is grieving over their lack of faith when confronting a seemingly hopeless situation. Jesus is grieving over the Spirit state of “believers” who do not “believe.”

Faith means trusting that RESURRECTION is always at hand. RESURRECTION is walking among us and is calling out to us. But the weeping sisters in this story can only imagine that if the magical one had only been there, “Lazarus would not have died.” But Jesus was there, or might have been there if Mary or Martha or Lazarus had had faith. Lazarus died into his spiritual stench because faith was missing. And faith, remember, is trust that the Infinite Silence is loving us no matter what circumstances are transpiring in our actual lives. This faith, this trust in the Infinite Silence, is the RESURRECTION.

And RESURRECTION is ETERNAL LIFE NOW. This chapter says absolutely nothing about immortality or about anything that might transpire after our physical deaths or at the end of time. This chapter is about the dynamics of the present moment--of each and every present moment. RESURRECTION is a dynamic within the ever-present NOW. NOW, only NOW, is the time when we can LIVE the RESURRECTED LIFE.

“Resurrection” is, of course, a metaphor, but it is a metaphor for talking about an actuality. Why is “resurrection” such a prominent metaphor in the Christian heritage? Because it expresses this fundamental discovery of the Christian breakthrough: if we die to our ego-enthralled finite network of relatednesses and come to see ourselves for what we actually are--a relationship with the Infinite Silence--, then we will experience LIFE in all its possible abundance. Being stuck in our ego enthrallments, in our finite mesh of comings and goings, is like being a corpse in a tomb rotting from lack of aliveness. If, however, we die to that lack of aliveness, lo and behold, we have become what we are and always were and always will be. We have become our authentic life. We have, thereby, experienced a “resurrection from the dead.”

And if we have been so “resurrected,” then we have, like Jesus, become the RESURRECTION. We have been given the power to go to all the tombs around us and cry out in a LOUD VOICE, “COME OUT.” And because we are OUT living our actual lives, our calling has POWER. Dead men and women hear us because we speak out of our own authenticity the words of LIFE. It is our authenticity that makes our voice LOUD. Dead men and women hear us because they too, in their deepest essence, are the RESURRECTION.

8. The Universal Path

John 14:1-31

The Fourth Gospel is like a hologram: each chapter contains the whole book. The same themes are repeated over and over. One of those themes is the Universality of the Jesus-path. This is a highly controversial theme in contemporary culture because most Christians and their critics have misunderstood “universality” to mean that the Christian religion is not one among other religions, but that being a Christian means embracing the true path and that all other paths are wrong or at least partial. This notion that Christianity, as a finite religion, is infinitely better than any other religion is plain and simple bigotry. It is also a complete misunderstanding of the theme of universality as this theme is developed in the Fourth Gospel.

Nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel is clearly telling us that there is a universal path. In the very first chapter, we are told of “THE” not “an” Ultimate Message which was built into the very creation of the cosmos. In chapter 3, we examined what it means to be reborn in “THE” Spirit not into “a” spirit. In chapter 6, we spoke of “THE” Food that nurtures the Spirit person. In chapter 8, we saw Jesus challenging all religious authorities with “THE” true authority. In chapter 9, Jesus is “THE” light of the world. In chapter 10, Jesus is “THE” good shepherd. In chapter 11, Jesus is “THE” resurrection. Now in chapter 14, the theme of universality reaches a sort of quintessence in this verse:

Jesus replied, “I am the way, I am the truth and I am the life; no one comes to the Infinite Parent except by me.”

Now what can this mean? It is the very essence of good Hinduism to proclaim that there are many religious paths that lead to the same Infinite goal. And the Hindu sages are completely correct in what they are saying. Every religious expression is a finite thing, and therefore no religious exercise can be the only way to an experience of Ultimateness. Some find one path useful and others find some other path useful. Hindu wisdom goes on to gestalt the many, many paths into groups: (1) the rational paths, (2) the devotional paths, (3) the physical-exercise paths, and (4) the serving-others paths. Different types of people find one or another of these paths more suited to them. And this is completely correct. No sensitive person can argue with this.

So how can we say that “Jesus is the way”--the one and only path? First of all, we have to understand that the gospel writer is not talking about religious paths. All religions are finite, and therefore no religion, including Christianity, can be THE universal path. The gospel writer, on this level of discourse, would agree entirely with the Hindu sages.

So how is Jesus the universal path? Jesus is not a religious path. And furthermore, there is no finite religious path that actually leads to the Infinite Silence. The finite leads to the finite. No finite religious practice can ensure a happening of Awe. There is no religious exercise that will make the Infinite Silence known. Only the Infinite Silence makes the Infinite Silence known. And the Infinite Silence makes the Infinite Silence known through Awe experiences, not through the exercise of a religious practice. The Infinite Silence sends Spirit, not a religious practice. Religious practices are all invented by human beings.

If we assume that the term “Jesus” can be expanded to mean any human flesh whatsoever through which the Infinite Silence speaks the Ultimate Message, then “Jesus” indicates any humanly embodied sending of Awe. “Jesus” is a universal dynamic operating in human life.

Whatever religious practices are used to express or beckon Awe, Jesus is the WAY that Awe works.

If the Ultimate Message has come to you through some Hindu sage, then that Hindu sage is Jesus. If the Ultimate Message has come to you through some Buddhist teacher, then that Buddhist teacher is Jesus. If the Ultimate Message has come to you through some tribal shaman, then that tribal shaman is Jesus. In other words, "Jesus" indicates the Ultimate Message embodied in human flesh. It might be your flesh. It might be my flesh.

So we return again to this basic question, "What is this Ultimate Message?" The Ultimate Message is a message from the Infinite Silence which says that the Infinite Silence is trustworthy. Are you experiencing the somber Awe that comes with having to die in a few weeks (or a few years, or a few decades)? The Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence says that this somber Awe is good for you. Are you experiencing the overwhelming Awe of freedom that comes with having to decide what to do with the next ten years (or ten minutes) of your life? The Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence says that this overwhelming Awe is good for you. Are you experiencing that wild, ecstatic, tranquil Awe of knowing that all Awe is the essence of being human? The Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence says that this wild, ecstatic, tranquil Awe is good for you. Are you experiencing the crassly challenging Awe that comes with having to return from your moments of Spirit ecstasy into living your everyday, mundane life in a Spirit manner? The Ultimate Message spoken by the Infinite Silence says that this crassly challenging Awe is good for you.

Whatever the Infinite Silence is sending your way, the Ultimate Message declares to you that the Infinite Silence is always sending LOVE for you. If you are someone who has done awful things in your past (and we all are), you may be worried about meeting an Infinite Silence who knows all secrets. Good news: the Ultimate Message declares to you that the Infinite Silence forgives everything. Your whole past is approved. You are perfectly fit for Awe in the living present. If you are someone who faces a terrifying future (and we all are), you may be worried about your Awe-full meeting with the Infinite Silence in those impending events. Good news: the Ultimate Message declares to you that the Infinite Silence has prepared for you a fine future. It may be death hanging on a cross. It may be losing loved ones. It may be a mind-debilitating sickness. It may be outliving all your friends. It may be an overwhelming set of responsibilities. It may be more pleasant and fascinating than dreadful. The Infinite Silence is now sending you Awe. And the Infinite Silence will always be sending you Awe. And it will be the Awe that is appropriate for you. How do you know? Because the Infinite Silence loves you: this is the Ultimate Message. Whatever Awe the Infinite Silence is sending you, the Infinite Silence is also sending you the courage to live that Awe creatively. The Infinite Silence always gives Life, an Eternal quality of Life, the Life of Awe before the Infinite Silence.

And this does not mean that the life of Awe is a life of passive resignation. No, the fine future to be sent by the Infinite Silence has not been completely decided. Ask for whatever future you want. Your asking makes a difference. Your free actions make a difference. But here is yet another wonder: whatever you ask for, the Infinite Silence will send you something even better. This is the Ultimate Message: the Infinite Silence loves you.

Now, those of you who have read the New Testament carefully will recognize that the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth do embody this Ultimate Message. That is why those who first experienced this inspiring historical person came to believe that Jesus was--in his words, style, and deeds--the Ultimate Message. But the Buddha, in so far as the Buddha was a healing event in the history of humanity (and he was) was also an embodiment of this same Ultimate Message. Any person who is a genuinely Spirit person and not simply a hoax or an escape from actual

human living, is an embodiment of the Ultimate Message. And since the Ultimate Message in Christian lore bears the name “Jesus,” any Spirit person, viewed through Christian terminology, is “Jesus.” It is in this sense, and in this sense alone, that Jesus is THE WAY.

When you are dealing with finite things you are dealing with relativity. There is not one finite thing that is Absolute, Final, Ultimate, or in some way IT. But when you are dealing with the Infinite, you are NOT dealing with relativity. There are not many Infinite Silences; there is just ONE. There are not many Ultimate Messages from the Infinite Silence; there is just ONE. This is simply the nature of Infinite actuality. The reason why these thoughts come so hard for us in our scientific, technologically crazed modern culture is that we emphasize the finite and ignore the Infinite. We do not know how to talk meaningfully about the Infinite, because we have suppressed our experience of the Infinite and thus do not know what we are talking about.

But if we do experience the Infinite, then we experience ourselves as knowing what we are talking about. We can understand the literary figure of Jesus conjured up by the writer of the Fourth Gospel when that literary figure says, “**I am the way, I am the truth and I am the life; no one comes to the Infinite Parent except by me.**” So let us listen as the gospel writer further elaborates these themes. The Jesus character is speaking:

“If you knew me, you would know my Infinite Parent also. From now on you do know the Infinite Silence; you have seen the Infinite Silence.”

Philip said to him, “Master, show us the Infinite Parent and we ask no more.”

Jesus answered, “Have I been all this time with you, Philip, and you still do not know me? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Infinite Parent. So how can you say, ‘Show us the Infinite Parent’? I am not myself the source of the words I speak to you; it is the Infinite Parent who dwells in me doing Infinite work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Infinite Parent and the Infinite Parent is in me; or else accept the evidence of the deeds themselves. In truth, in complete truth, I tell you, anyone who has trust in me will do what I am doing; and that person will do greater things still because I am going to the Infinite Parent. Indeed, anything you ask in my name I will do, so that the Infinite Parent may be glorified in the Singular Offspring. If you ask anything in my name I will do it.”

So, if you or I really learn to *know* some person who is a physical embodiment of the Ultimate Message, we will know the Infinite Silence as well. If we are going to truly understand this, we must not turn loose of our clarity that the Infinite Silence is INFINITE, not finite, and that the Infinite Silence is SILENT. The Infinite Silence says nothing. The Infinite Silence reveals nothing. The Infinite Silence sends no channeled messages. The Infinite Silence is SILENT.

But the physical embodiment of the Ultimate Message does say words, does do deeds, does walk among us. And if we are to hear the Infinite Silence speak we must listen to the physical embodiment of the Ultimate Message. Now this might mean listening to Lao Tzu or Siddhartha or Mohammed or me, or you. But in the literary story which is the Fourth Gospel, we are listening to Jesus. Actually, because it is a literary story, we are not listening to the historical Jesus, we are listening to a disciple of Jesus; we are listening to whoever it was who wrote this Fourth Gospel. Apparently the author of this gospel believed his (or her) own words about being empowered to be Jesus, for he has no reserve about putting the words he made up into the mouth of his Jesus character. So it is the gospel writer we are listening to, and this gospel writer is clearly claiming that the words he is self-awarely making up are physical embodiments of the Ultimate Message. The gospel writer is breaking the SILENCE of the Infinite Silence and reaching out to us to be HEARD.

Now what does it mean for us to HEAR? We are still speaking of Spirit matters, remember. We can hear the words of this gospel with our physical ears and still hear nothing from the Infinite Silence. In order for us to hear through these words the SPEECH of the Infinite Silence, we must grow some Spirit ears. That is, we must be capable and willing to experience Awe. Awe, happening in our own lives, is the Speech of the Infinite Silence. And when Awe happens, it happens because the Infinite Silence makes it happen. The gospel writer does not make Awe happen. I do not make Awe happen. Only the Infinite Silence makes Awe happen. So, if you are experiencing any Awe in reading these reflections, it is the Infinite Silence speaking to you through that direct line of communication which you have with the Infinite Silence. In your essence, tarnished though that essence may be, you are a relationship with the Infinite Silence. If you are not hearing the words of the gospel writer or my words in the light of that direct relationship you have with the Infinite Silence, then you are not hearing me, and you are not hearing the gospel writer, and you are certainly not hearing the Infinite Silence.

So, this is what the gospel writer is struggling to say to us in mere human words: if you are to know the Infinite Silence, you must know this Infinite Source of all Awe through the voices of the Awed Ones who are attempting to tell you about this Awe. But if you do not experience this Awe yourself, you do not hear what the Awed Ones are saying to you. That is, you do not know the Ultimate Messenger (the Singular Offspring), and you do not know the Infinite Parent either. If you have ears that hear, then you will know Awe in your own depths, you will know the Awed Ones, and you will know the Source of all Awe, the Infinite Silence. But perhaps you don't know. Perhaps Jesus walks among you every day, but you do not know him. You do not hear him. You experience no Awe.

Ask for Anything.

Next I want to tangle with two verses of scripture about which more foolishness has been written than any other two verses in the entire New Testament.

Indeed, anything you ask in my name I will do, so that the Infinite Parent may be glorified in the Singular Offspring. If you ask anything in my name I will do it.

If you suppose that this means that you can just pronounce the name "Jesus" and this "name" will magically get you any finite thing you want, you are in for some big disappointments. On the mere finite level of understanding, which seems to be the only level that is popular these days, these two verses are clearly false.

So, spiritually speaking, what does it mean for you or for me to ask the Infinite Silence for something in the name of Jesus, the Ultimate Message? First of all, to be in an actual relationship of asking for something from the Infinite Silence means that you are in Awe before the Infinite Silence. And in order to be in Awe you must have the courage to trust the Awe-Sender. To pray to the Infinite Silence means that you trust that the Infinite Silence cares for you enough to listen to you. To pray to the Infinite Silence means that you believe that the Infinite Silence loves you. And to trust in the presence of such "love" means that you trust that whatever the Infinite Silence has sent and will send to be your life is good for you. If you believe that, then you have believed the Ultimate Message. You are operating your life in the name of Jesus--that is, you are trusting Jesus when he says to you that the Infinite Silence is indeed your loving Parent and that you, having entrusted your whole life to this Message, have indeed been reborn to membership in the Singular Offspringhood. You are a Son or Daughter of the Infinite Silence. Now under these conditions of Spirit existence, you may ask the Infinite Silence for whatever you want and expect to get it.

Clearly, you or I, in such a state of Awe, are not operating out of finite cravings and aversions. A death to our enthrallment with the finite dimension of living has already taken place. And a resurrection to boundless Spirit freedom has replaced the life of being a slave to your cravings and aversions. So, in freedom we are now asking for our future from the Determiner of our Destiny whom we trust. In doing so, we discover that this very freedom we are exercising as we ask for our future has an immense part to play in determining our actual destiny. If, in our freedom, we ask to return to a life that is safe and plain and boring and Aweless, we may discover, to our horror, that this request has been granted. If, in our freedom, we ask to continue in the life of freedom and learn to embrace even more risk and adventure and excitement and overwhelming Awe, we may discover that this request has been granted. And what more than this do we want to ask for? A new car? You can ask the Infinite Silence for a new car. But here is the catch: you will be asking for a new car in one of these two ways: (1) in the context that you need a car to carry out your calling to serve the Infinite Silence or (2) in the context that you have a great aversion to walking or to driving your old clunker that is perhaps provoking your neighbors to laughter. So if you are asking in the context of needing this transportation for carrying out your calling to continue the life of freedom, you will find that your very freedom will produce this car, or if it does not, you will find that you don't need the car to carry out the life of freedom you have chosen. You will experience that the Infinite Silence is sending you something better than the car you asked for, and you will be grateful.

Suppose that you ask the Infinite Silence in the name of Jesus for such things as these: a renewed Christian community in your part of the planet, or a renewed responsibility on the part of the whole human race relative to being a sustainable style of living within the ecological limits of this planet. Such asking, if persisted in, will do great things in the actual course of history. Indeed, the following outlandish promise made by this Fourth Gospel Jesus figure can become plausible to you:

“In truth, in complete truth, I tell you, he who has trust in me will do what I am doing; and he will do greater things still”

The writer of the Fourth Gospel must have experienced himself as doing very great things. He (or perhaps she, remember) not only wrote this gospel and three letters that became part of the New Testament, but also, she must have seen hundreds of people be reborn of Spirit through her ministries. Clearly, she asked the Infinite Silence for much and great things had indeed happened. She (or it may have been he) was speaking from experience when these verses were written.

The Ultimate Message is a Secret.

In this fourteenth chapter, the gospel writer continues developing these themes of Spirit power and universality. In verse 15, the Jesus figure is speaking to his disciples:

“If you love me, you will obey my commandments; and I will ask the Infinite Parent and the Infinite Parent will give you another to be your Advocate who will be with you forever--the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot receive the Spirit of Truth, because the world neither sees nor knows the Spirit of Truth. But you know the Spirit of Truth, because the Spirit of Truth dwells with you and is in you. I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you. In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me; because I live, you too will live; then you will know that I am in my Infinite Parent, and you in me and I in you. The person who has received my commands and obeys them--that is the person who loves me; and the person who loves me will be

loved by my Infinite Parent; and I will love that person and disclose myself to that person.”

Judas asked him--the other Judas, not Iscariot-- “Master, what can have happened, that you mean to disclose yourself to us alone and not to the world?”

Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Infinite Parent will love that person, and we will come to that person and make our dwelling with that person. On the other hand, the person who does not love me does not heed what I say. For the word you hear is not mine: it is the word of the Infinite Parent who sent me. I have told you all this while I am here with you; but your Advocate, the Spirit of Truth whom the Infinite Parent will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you.”

The question asked by the other Judas provides an interesting foil for understanding what these elaborate teachings are about. The other Judas is distressed that Jesus is not going to perform some public miracle that proves to everyone that Jesus is the Ultimate Message. This dialogue between Judas and Jesus is still relevant today, for we can hear in millions of churches every Easter morning how the resurrection of Jesus was a public miracle that proves to the world that Jesus was, in some fashion, IT. But the author of the Fourth Gospel is explicitly denying that Jesus’ significance can be seen at all by the general world. This is distressing to the other Judas because this secret quality of the revealed Truth places him in the position of having to be loyal to a Truth that most other people are not able to see. This will obviously make living this Truth harder.

Jesus is, however, being pictured as a bringer of comfort. He is saying something like this: “Even though you soon won’t have me--this particular, strong, Spirit figure--in your midst any longer, you will have a strong Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. And this inwardly experienced reality will confirm all that I have taught you and keep on teaching you more. Even more profoundly put, this inwardly experienced Spirit will weld you into a union with me and with my Infinite Parent.” In other words, the disciple becomes the master: the disciple is one with the master, filled with the Spirit that filled the master, and related to the master’s Infinite Parentage in a direct fashion. But all this takes place in secret. This disclosure of the true reality of Jesus is only given to those who obey the Ultimate Message which Jesus was. The rest of the world sees nothing.

Now if the disclosure that Jesus brought was a set of doctrines, the whole world could see that. If the disclosure that Jesus brought was a set of religious practices, the whole world could see that. If the disclosure that Jesus brought was a new law or some new principles or some new moral teachings, the whole world could see that.

But the disclosure that Jesus brought cannot be seen at all in a finite manner. The disclosure that Jesus brought has no finite content whatsoever: no rational content, no emotional content, no moral content, no scientific content, no miraculous content, no ordinary content, no finite content whatsoever. The Ultimate Message is a contentless message, and that is why it is also universal. If the Ultimate Message had finite content then it would not be universal, it would be just one more religious teaching alongside other equally valid religious teachings.

But the Ultimate Message is not a religious teaching. The Ultimate Message is a contentless message: it speaks to us about all the content of our lives and yet the Ultimate Message adds no further content of its own. The Ultimate Message is no more and no less than this one simple and completely invisible Truth: all the content of our lives is Love directed toward us from the Infinite Silence. If we can accept and obey that Truth, we will be filled with the Spirit of Truth

yoking us with Jesus and with Jesus' Infinite Parentage. Our obedience to the commandments of Jesus means nothing more and nothing less than trusting the Ultimate Message that the Infinite Silence loves us.

Becoming the Ultimate Message

And let us not forget the astonishing dynamic which we have already discussed in earlier chapters: when we trust Jesus, we become Jesus. And this means, wonder of wonders, we become the Ultimate Message sent to all human beings by the Infinite Silence. In general, the blind world has not yet received this Message. Only some of us have received this Message. And if we are among those who have received this Message, then we have been given the task of being this Message toward those who have not yet received It. Since being asked to be the Ultimate Message to a blind and deaf world sounds overwhelming, even down right terrifying, Jesus is comforting the disciples (namely, those of us who trust the Ultimate Message) with the assurance that we will have ample support for our task. The Spirit of Truth will live in us. (Also Jesus will be with us, for we will be to each other the living body of Jesus.) And most important of all, the Infinite Silence, the Final Power of the entire cosmos, will continue to be the ongoing sender of support for this entire arrangement. If the Infinite Silence be for us, who can be against us? Well, plenty of people actually, but they cannot win, for the Infinite Silence always wins in the final reckoning. With support like this, we need not be afraid.

So chapter 14 begins and ends with statements of assurance. Jesus is going to leave the disciples. Putting it bluntly, he is going to die. He is going to return to the Infinite Silence who brought him into the world. This is obviously a crisis situation for the entire journey on Earth of the Ultimate Message. Everything depends upon the courage of the disciples, so Jesus says to them (not the historical Jesus, but the fictitious Jesus in the drama of the Fourth Gospel):

“Set your troubled hearts at rest. Trust the Infinite Silence always; trust also in me. There is plenty of room in the household of the Infinite Silence: if this were not so I would have told you. I am returning to the Infinite Silence in order to prepare for you a place in this household. Further, I am returning to you to welcome you to this place, that where I AM you may also BE.”

Now this particular passage has been frequently sentimentalized to mean that all we egotistical, selfish, and over-optimistic wretches are, at some time in the future, going to join the divine being Jesus in a literal heavenly realm. But the author of the Fourth Gospel is quite plainly talking about the here and now. Not someday, but NOW, those of us who dare to be disciples of Jesus will be exactly where he always was and still is and shall ever be. And where is that? In the household of the Infinite Silence. Is this a place far away and after our earthly lives? No, the place is this HERE and this NOW. Then why aren't we already there? Because we are blind, deaf, lame, sick and dead to the actual HERE and NOW. Jesus goes to the cross to awaken us to our actual HERE and NOW. Jesus goes to the cross to heal us of our flight from reality and thus from all our various forms of stench and corruption that have resulted from this flight. Jesus is preparing a place for us, our place in the household of the Infinite Silence. This was always our place. We were always (in our essence) the twin sister or twin brother of Jesus. But we forgot. We ran away from home. We fell from this high station into a pitiful, cowardly, arrogant, selfish, greedy, lustful, jealous, envious, rage-filled, despairing mess.

“But let not your heart be troubled,” says Jesus, “I am going into the very teeth of death to prepare a place for you. By dying, I am going to give you the very life you think you might be missing if I leave you.” How did the gospel writer know that these dynamics were true? Because they were true for this gospel writer!

In the closing words of this chapter, the gospel writer, through the mouth of a courageous Jesus, returns to this theme of reassuring the disciples:

“Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, such as the world cannot give. Set your troubled hearts at rest and banish your fears. You heard me say, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved me you would have been glad to hear that I am going to the Infinite Parent, for the Infinite Parent is greater than I. I have told you now, beforehand, so that when it happens you may have trust. I shall not talk much longer with you, for the Prince of this world approaches. He has no rights over me, but the world must be shown that I love the Infinite Parent and do exactly as the Infinite Parent commands; so up, let us go forward!”

“Forward,” means into the waiting jaws of death. But “forward” also means intentionally living your life and intentionally living your death. “Forward” means trusting the Infinite Silence just as Jesus trusted the Infinite Silence. “Forward” means obeying the Infinite Silence exactly. It is through following this example that we receive the gift of peace, not peace with the world, not a sleazy compromise with the powers that be, but peace with the Infinite Silence, peace with the essence of our existence. This tranquility, no event can disturb. No loss, however extreme, can take away the gift of peace spoken of by the author of the Fourth Gospel through the mouth of this Jesus figure.

And such peace has no content. It is contentless. And so this peace is also universal. It is not Christian peace, or Jewish peace, or Hindu peace, or any other kind of religious achievement. No, this peace is simply authentic humanness in its raw reality. No human being is beyond the possibility of experiencing this peace. We are speaking here of matters that have to do with the very structure of the cosmos.

It is in this sense that the walk of Jesus is the walk to which every human being is called, for this walk is the walk of being no more than and no less than who we actually are in the actual HERE and NOW of our lives. This walk is THE WALK. This walk is THE WAY, THE TRUTH, and THE LIFE; and there is no other path to peace with the Infinite Silence.

9. Feed my Sheep

John 21:1-25

The Fourth Gospel ends with these words:

There is much else that Jesus did. If it were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose the whole world could not hold the books that would be written.

I find this verse rather amusing, for this gospel writer has been voluminously creative in making up things that Jesus did. In this closing line, it is almost like the gospel writer is saying, "Well, I suppose I must stop somewhere." In addition to the humor, these closing sentences have deep significance for me: we who are the disciples of Jesus must continue to write and rewrite the story of Jesus until the end of time. There is no end to the story because Gospel writing is not biography about a fixed person, but "life thought" by those who remember Jesus as the exemplar of what all human life most profoundly is. So the Fourth Gospel, and the other three as well, are not scientific biographies. They are theological works attempting to express what it looks like to truly live our lives.

I am personally glad that the author of the Fourth Gospel did not quit before he or she made up the story that is told in this last chapter. We are now in the resurrection part of the overall narrative. Jesus, having already entered into death, is now coming back and showing himself to his disciples.

Some time later, Jesus showed himself to his disciples once again, by the Sea of Tiberias; and in this way. Simon Peter and Thomas "the Twin" were together with Nathanael of Cana-in-Galilee. The sons of Zebedee and two other disciples were also there. Simon Peter said, "I am going out fishing."

"We will go with you," said the others. So they started and got into the boat. But that night they caught nothing.

We should know by now that the author of this gospel is setting us up for another lesson in the Spirit dimension of our lives. This story is not about life after death or about miracles that prove something or other. This story is about fishing and feeding. Actually, the story is not about feeding, but about FEEDING. And the story is not about fishing, but about FISHING. The symbolism of being "fishers of human beings" had been given to the Christian community decades earlier.

In this final metaphorical story of the Fourth Gospel, the phrase "caught nothing" probably alludes to some "down period" in public response to the good news of the Ultimate Message. But clearly, this bold gospel writer is not without hope for getting this impasse straightened out. We see this hope expressed in the following words:

Morning came, and there stood Jesus on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. He called to them, "Friends, have you caught anything?"

They answered, "No."

He said, "Shoot the net to the starboard, and you will make a catch." They did so, and found they could not haul the net aboard, there were so many fish in it.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Master!” When Simon Peter heard that, he wrapped his coat about him (for he had stripped) and plunged into the sea. The rest of them came on in the boat, towing the net full of fish; for they were not far from land, only about a hundred yards.

When they came ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish laid on it and some bread. Jesus said, “Bring some of your catch.” Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to land, full of big fish, a hundred and fifty three of them; and yet, many as they were, the net was not torn.

Jesus said, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared to ask, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Master. Jesus now came up, took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish in the same way.

It is interesting to me that the disciples did not know at first that it was Jesus. Perhaps you have been asking yourself if the Jesus in this gospel is really Jesus. Perhaps you have been asking if this gospel writer is truly an embodiment of the Ultimate Message. Perhaps you have even wondered if my rendering of all this into modern metaphor is a true rendering of this gospel writer’s intent. Indeed, when is Jesus really Jesus?

In the above story, the disciples began to catch on that it was really Jesus when fish were caught. One clear meaning of this story is this: when you follow the true Jesus and do what Jesus says to do, you catch fish. That is, when you live the Ultimate Message the way the Ultimate Message needs to be lived, people will be healed by your living and your communicating.

The last line of the above passage is an allusion to feeding on the body of Jesus. If you eat Jesus and do what Jesus says to do, you will find plenty of response to your work. Also, implied is this: if you are not getting any response to your witness, it may be that you have not eaten recently of the proper FOOD and are not obeying the voice of the proper MASTER.

Next, having established its theme, the story focuses on one disciple, Peter, and the question of his wholeheartedness:

After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than all else?”

“Yes, Master,” he answered, “you know that I love you.”

“Then feed my lambs,” he said. A second time he asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, master, you know I love you.”

“Then tend my sheep.” A third time he said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time, “Do you love me?” “Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

“And further, I tell you in complete truth: when you were young you fastened your

belt about you and walked where you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the manner of death by which Peter was to glorify the Infinite Silence.) Then he added, “Follow me.”

Peter looked round, and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved---the one who at supper had leaned back close to him to ask the question, “Master, who is it that will betray you?” When he caught sight of him, Peter asked, “Master, what will happen to him?”

Jesus said, “If it should be my will that he wait until I come, what is that to you? Follow me.”

That saying of Jesus became current in the community, and was taken to mean that that disciple would not die. But in fact Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If it should be my will that he wait until I come, what is that to you?”

The gospel writer is poking fun at our attitudes of envy when we see that our following the Truth of the Ultimate Message is costing us more than someone else’s following of the Truth. When we are considering the subject of following the Truth of our actual relationship with the Infinite Silence, there can be no bargaining, no consideration of what is fair, no comparison of our life with someone else’s life. No, we must simply follow and accept whatever consequences are given with our particular following. Perhaps we will be hung upside down to die in pain. Perhaps we will die at age 110 in our sleep.

Whatever the outcome, we are asked to follow and following means feeding the sheep with our whole lives, with our whole bodies, with our very life blood. Now, what does this mean? The theme of sacrifice on behalf of others has been, like every other Christian theme, appallingly distorted. The notion that the blood of the martyrs magically benefits anyone needs to be ranked on the superstition scale right up there with the tooth fairy and buying relief for your grandfather who is suffering in purgatory. Also deplorable is the implication that physical pleasure is a condition to be avoided in favor of some gloomy codependence toward the felt needs of others. No, no, no! The sacrifice that accompanies following Jesus is not something magical or forced: it is simply part of living the abundant life, the life of freedom, the life of ordinary down-to-Earth integrity.

Further, “feeding the sheep” is not finding some way to nobly martyr yourself, but simply living your life authentically, that is, being the Ultimate Message in the situations you choose for your death ground. Feeding the sheep means putting your life and your death into your fundamental doing. There is always some sort of cost for doing this. Living your real life with integrity in this world which is, for the most part, dedicated to escape and superficiality will mean troubling the waters, will be controversial, will disturb and distress. You will indeed be rejected and opposed by those who think they are happy in their illusions and shabby living.

It is important to our own Spirit health that we understand these dynamics of the cross with pristine clarity. People who openly live their lives in trust of the Infinite Silence must suffer opposition from those who mistrust the Infinite Silence. Such suffering is simply part of living your life realistically. Such suffering is simply part of having an integrity that you live openly. Such suffering intensifies the further you grow in your maturity of being an authentic human being and in your courage to openly manifest that authenticity.

No one needs to go in search of such suffering. There is no need to pretend that you prefer such suffering to being loved and appreciated for your good work. We may, of course, deeply

prefer our authenticity and integrity to some cowardly accommodation with the evils of this world. Also, our preference for authenticity can take precedence over our preference for physical and emotional comfort. But preference is a poor category for describing the choice between finite comforts and Infinitely-related authenticity. The choice for authenticity is a leap off the cliff into a bold adventure--the pains and pleasures of which are quite secondary.

This is the underlying issue about which Jesus is confronting Peter in the above story. His question to Peter, "Do you love me?" means "Do you intend to live your life in trust of the Infinite Silence?" Or "Are you grateful for having been delivered from your egoistic mistrust into the glorious liberty of the Offspring of the Infinite Silence?" To actually embrace such a life means living it out in full integrity. It means communicating to others that this is indeed life and life abundant. And doing so will cost you. So each of us who, like Peter, claim to be followers of Jesus must answer this question, "Do I love 'Jesus' more than all else?" "Do I love the Ultimate Message and being the Ultimate Message more than all else?" If I do, then I must of necessity put myself out there as a source of nourishment to others.

And being nourishment will entail sacrifices. This is the realism contained in our ritual eating of the body and blood of Jesus. Nourishment is given through the sacrifices I must make in order to live the life of being a nourishing person. How can I make this seemingly horrible truth seem reasonable and ordinary? Look at it this way: if I were not a human being but some sort of super-being who was being protected by the Infinite from all harm, then I could not be a means of communicating the Infinite Message. Being a human being who is rejected for my authenticities enables me to model the meaning of trusting the Infinite Silence. Being human is the best role for communicating the forgiveness of the Infinite Silence to a blind humanity who is rejecting my and their authentic living.

So let us consider one more time this plain, ordinary down-to-Earth truth: in order to be the Ultimate Message, I must join Jesus in being a mere human being subject to the rejection of those I am attempting to serve. If the Ultimate Message cannot be rejected, then it cannot be freely accepted. The Ultimate Message is not an authoritarian doctrine crammed down human throats by some all powerful tyrant. The Ultimate Message is a fragile human being trusting the Infinite Silence and beckoning others to freely join in this life of trust. Therefore, if I am truly embodying and bearing the Ultimate Message to others then I must leave space for those others to reject this Message as well as space for them to *freely* accept it. And since embodying the Ultimate Message is what I must do to communicate that Message, if they reject the Message, they reject me.

Peter is a symbol for all those who follow Jesus in being and communicating the Ultimate Message, that healing Message which feeds profoundly other people's lives. The gospel writer, in poking fun at the quality of Peter's dedication, is poking fun at all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus. Yes, Peter loves the healing he has received, but he is less than willing to pay the full cost of being the healed person in the midst of a spiritually blind and spiritually starving world. Peter, in this story, is not fully committed to being the witness that is needed to feed the spiritually hungry folk who surround this particular disciple. That is why the persistent Jesus asks him and asks him and asks him yet again.

Perhaps the gospel writer sensed that such halfheartedness was the fundamental reason why communities of Christians at the end of the first century were doing more fishing than catching. Perhaps people were not responding to the communities' witnessing because the witnessing was not daring to challenge the real illusions and misunderstandings that actually plagued people at that particular time. Perhaps their witnessing had become safe. Perhaps the situation was not unlike the familiar story of modern preachers who are more interested in keeping their jobs than in giving voice to the Truth as they know it. Perhaps many or most Christians at the end of

the first century were reluctant to push on through to the full meaning of the Ultimate Message because they realized (like you or I or people we know) that to truly communicate the Ultimate Message would be costly.

Consider for example, what costs might be entailed if you taught, in the manner I am suggesting, the chapters of the Fourth Gospel to a typical group of “churchgoers” (or non-churchgoers for that matter). In each chapter of my reflections on the Fourth Gospel, some common misunderstanding of the Ultimate Message is being challenged. Each chapter calls us to understand and live some deepened authenticity. Will all hear? Will all heed such calls? Perhaps some will become angry with us for being and communicating these teachings. Perhaps we will become estranged from some with whom we are now close. Perhaps we will become close to some whom we now consider strange. Yes, we cannot avoid this question: what will happen to us if we live in our own way our own best acceptance of the Ultimate Message we have been discussing? Costs will certainly be involved.

In the gospel writer’s story, Jesus asks Peter three times about his love for the Truth. These askings implied that Peter had not yet put together that his reluctance to die a disagreeable death was the real reason why his fishing was not yielding fish. Peter and the others were fishing on the wrong side of the boat. They had to hear from Jesus how their fishing had to be done. And this is what they had to hear: that real blood, real bodies, real integrity was the food that the sheep needed to have.

So when we who are leaders or teachers in some modern group communicate a message that does not have within it the full integrity of our whole lives, then we are fishing on the wrong side of the boat. If we do not speak from our own experience of the Awe of the Infinite Silence, we are not feeding the sheep. If we do not risk offending the very bones of blind, illusion-bound people, we are not doing the work that Jesus does: so we do not love Jesus! We do not trust the Ultimate Message that living the full Truth of our actual lives is life and life abundant for ourselves and for everyone else.

And we must not limit our image of “the sheep that need feeding” to those who call themselves “Christians.” All people are the sheep, or the potential sheep, of the Good Shepherd. So our fishing takes place in every workplace, in every play place, in every house place, in every political place. Wherever our life shows up, our being the Ultimate Message of the Infinite Silence is also showing up. Are we willing to pay the price of being that Message to those among whom we dwell? Are we willing to be misunderstood, opposed, perhaps rejected and scandalized simply because we tell the Truth that we actually know?

Or, on the other hand, are we willing to water the Truth down to whatever is palatable to the people among whom we live? This is, after all, the common practice; it is often called “politeness” or “tolerance” or “getting along.” Are we going to disturb the waters or water down the Truth?

Now, I want to insert a warning about how all this can be misunderstood. Living the Ultimate Message does not mean saying everything we know to every person we meet. We must choose our ground and invest ourselves in the tasks we see as most productive. In one of the earlier gospels, we hear Jesus warning his disciples not to “cast their pearls before swine.” Not everyone is ready to hear the Ultimate Message. And even if they are, it is not necessary that they hear it from you. You must choose your ground and communicate with those whom you choose to serve. If you are indeed living the Ultimate Message, you are making your choices not in order to avoid rejection, for rejections will come no matter where you choose your ground. You make your choices in order to feed some sheep--some sheep who may eat the food you offer and thus become food that feeds other sheep that feeds still other sheep that

feeds still other sheep. It may be our intent that all be fed, but we must begin feeding someone somewhere. And those who will accept or reject the food we offer will always surprise us. Who will eat or not eat the Ultimate Message is a deep mystery, and this primordial “either-or” is forever beyond our control.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel clearly went out of his or her way to restate the gospel in terms that would strike to the quick of what needed to be heard by people in that historical moment. We still benefit from this nameless person having done this daring work. So let us listen one more time to the last words that this gospel writer wanted to have Jesus say to us: “Feed my lambs! And by the way, don’t ask what the consequences will be. Tend my sheep! And if someone else’s feeding works out fairly painlessly what is that to you? FEED MY SHEEP!”

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2.

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