

God Is Vulnerable

This idea hit me at one of the services this fall. I don't remember which one, but I remember how I felt thinking about it & saying it. My experience was similar to the experience I had when I heard that story about the astronaut who went into space. When he returned he was asked if on his journey if he had he seen God. He answered, "Yes..... and SHE is BLACK".

The experience I had was one of feeling the statement was absurd and at the same time quite important. Absurd because culturally we learn that God is male and he is the light or white. Quite important because it confronted our cultural and theological dualism that not only sets white against black and male against female but then ranks male and white above female and black in a dualistic hierarchy. We know that men and women of every color and every shape and size are holy and precious and have every right to be here. That they are a manifestation of the Great Mystery or God if you like.

At this time of year, we celebrate the birth of light with the winter solstice. But let's not forget the intrinsic value of the dark. I want to celebrate that darkness. For me the cold darkness of winter is a time for contemplation, reflection, a constant meditation on the need for quiet slower times to take stock you my life. To contemplate the mystery of life and of my life in particular. Even at the height of the summer months I relish a late night walk in the darkness when the streets are empty and the trees and the grass of

this small town seem to come to life. I feel that I'm not alone but with all the world and all the universe. Of course at this time of year those trees and that grass are not as alive as in the summer and I have to admit that they in some way they have died. Oh, they will come back next summer but they will not be exactly the same. Their vulnerability is implicit.

When I was child, there was tree across the street from where I lived. It was a maple. It was in the young summer of its life. It was so big compared to me and yet I was not afraid. That tree seemed so solid as if it could live forever. When I would climb its branches with the summer leaves in place, I was hidden and protected. That tree was my friend. Well about a year ago I drove past the location of my old home. It was thankfully gone but from a distance my old maple tree friend seemed to be alive and well. But when I got closer, I found the bark was covered with moss or mold. It had gotten much bigger and was still impressive. Seeing what had happened to the surrounding landscape, I was surprised it had not been chopped down. Regardless, I knew my old friends' days were numbered. His root system was probably damaged by all the new construction and it appeared that the area around the tree just didn't have the drainage that it needed. I put my hand on that tree and thanked him for his example and his friendship. I know that sounds ridiculous; it's just a tree! But as the Native Americans know we are all related and that is the basic metaphor I chose to live today and the one that I naturally lived as a boy. Until I was theologically 'educated'.

What I learned was that trees were objects, things. That nature was fallen and evil and that god was an entity out on a throne separate from nature and separate from human beings. This god on his throne was in control, unchanging and omniscient. And of course he was a carpenter who 'made us' in his cosmic workshop. With this 'education' I strove to build a life, get control of life, of myself and I systematically buried any conscious awareness of vulnerability. As they say, 'better dead than weak, better dead than vulnerable'. The sad truth is I was most dead, most lost, most out of control when I buried what I had defined as weak. In the Gospel of Thomas, a full copy of which was unearthed back in the 1940's in Egypt, Jesus is quoted as saying, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." I love this saying and many of the sayings in that gospel. They smack of Japanese Buddhist koan's. A koan is a verbal puzzle given by Buddhist monks to help students on the road to enlightenment. These puzzle's didn't ultimately bring me to my vulnerability but to my wholeness, which has implicit in it vulnerability. To BE a whole human being, which all of you are at this moment, whether you experience it or not, is to be vulnerable as well as strong, creative, courageous, afraid and any and every other quality you can think of. What I had to learn was that my greatest weakness was that I could never be weak. This is a delusion, a fantasy, it's wishful thinking.

As I said, my basic myth and metaphor is interdependency and wholeness. From this GOD ceases to be a noun and

becomes a verb, a process. When god becomes the entire process of life not an entity projected out on a throne, then divine truth can be found in nature. But if God IS nature, the process of nature itself, then what of death? What of the 99 % of species that have become extinct on this planet? God is vulnerable. Nothing lasts forever, everything changes. I no longer believe that god is a monarchical boss that is all-powerful and invulnerable. What I do know, is that God is incredibly creative, and resilient. In fact, if I had to choose one word to describe God or the Great Mystery it would be resilient. Physicists have speculated that 'big bang' that created our universe may have happened enumerable times. Those other universes may have collapsed just as quickly as they were formed but some may have lasted for quite a long time. But in the end they died, transformed. God is vulnerable but resilient. I remember Joseph Campbell, the world mythologist speaking with Bill Moyers hinting at this divine resiliency with a humorous story about grass. This is a paraphrase.

“Take for instance grass. Every couple of weeks some chap comes by with a lawn mower and cuts it down. What if the grass said.... oh well that's it ...it's no use.. I quit!”

But of course the grass keeps on growing in spite of the seeming futility of it all. It is not futile! Being is, in and of itself, precious. I'm reminded of another story from China:

A student was told by his teacher, that everything had value and that he wanted the student to leave and reflect on this.

The student left and did as he was told. He came upon an elephant, clearly the elephant had value. It could carry and move things. He came upon river and again he could see that the river provided fish and transportation and therefore had value. Then..... he came upon a tree. He noted:

The tree does not bare fruit so it doesn't provide food.

The tree does not bare many leaves so it can't shade anyone from the sun.

Birds don't make nests in the tree and children do not play in the tree as the branches are too weak and are easily swayed on a windy day.

The carpenter avoids the tree as it is useless in making furniture.

The wood itself cannot be burned because the wood holds water and rots before it can be used.

The student was disillusioned. He went back to the teacher and told him of his encounter with this useless tree. The teacher asked to be brought to this tree so he could see for himself. Upon arrival the teacher smiled knowingly. The student eager to have this confusion cleared up asked what the teacher was smiling about. The teacher said, "This is the wisest tree in existence. Through many life times it evolved so as to be the teacher of the most important lesson. That everything has value in its BEINGNESS."

The vulnerability of this tree was also its strength.

I've found that "holistic strength" has vulnerability implicit in it. When little Emma is BEING herself she is profoundly vulnerable but also charming, courageous and

resilient. She is also very easily hurt. I think of a flower, a rose, how beautiful and delicate it is but, with the squeeze of a hand how it can be easily crushed into oblivion. If we were to see the beauty of that flower, we had to see it in its wholeness. In a state of being in which it could be destroyed in a heart beat.

What we have in our culture of theological dualism is a caricature of strength, which embodies strength as the capacity to control, destroy, dominate and experientially separate people from each other. To stand rigidly, without flexibility. Following this embodied theological dualism leads us to court death. Helping us turn the Earth into a commodity to be exploited rather realizing it is an extended part of our body that we must respect. As Lao Tsu, the founder of Taoism said in the Tao Te Ching:

"When men are born they are soft and supple;
dead they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead they are brittle and dry.

Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life."

When we are flexible and open we are holistically strong. We allow ourselves to grow into the people we are meant to be. Yes grow; you cannot 'make' yourself into who you're meant to be, you must grow into it. A child is not

‘made’ into an adult, a child grows into adulthood. If that child is taught that they are separate from everything, that life is a fight to win rather than a process to be lived, then they will become that kind of adult. One that thinks they have to ‘make’ themselves into something worthwhile rather than allowing themselves to ‘grow’ into every new chapter of their lives; that security comes from the denial of vulnerability and the worshiping of strength as control.

I think that real security comes from allowing a real embodied experience of vulnerability, a whole vulnerability, as we recognize our interdependence. Again Lao Tsu:

“If you want something to diminish you must first let it flourish.”

If you want a more secure world than ‘let flourish’ the reality that regardless of how much we try to deny our intrinsic vulnerability, the more we psychologically armor ourselves, the less real security we have. Remember: “If you do not bring forth that which is within you that which you do not forth will destroy you.”

I want to end with some words by a Norwegian theologian, Sturla Stålsett:

'Vulnerability is the unique capacity for receptivity and empathy which allows human beings to acknowledge and care for their responsibility for each other, for the

community and their environment. Against this aspect of vulnerability, we ought not protect ourselves. On the contrary, it is a necessary precondition for the kind of security that isn't only about me and mine, or us and ours, based on some implicit assumption that might makes right.'