



**Forty Meaty Meditations  
for the Secular-Religious**

**Motivation for the Great  
Work**

**John P. Cock**

**Foreword by Thomas Berry, author *The Great Work***

4/8/01

## Motivation for the Great Work

To Karen & Jim,  
Be sustained in  
your great work.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to be "John", written in black ink.

# Motivation for the Great Work:

Forty Meaty Meditations  
for the Secular-Religious

John P. Cock

Authors Choice Press  
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**Motivation for the Great Work**  
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- **Called To Be:** A Spirit Odyssey (2000)
- **The Transparent Event:** Post-Modern Christ Images (2nd ed., 2001)

*Dedicated To Lynda,*

**my joyfully tempered wife, whose style embodies the  
message that creation is sacred and to be honored.**

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# *Foreword*

by Thomas Berry<sup>1</sup>

author of *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*

WE LIVE IN A WONDERFUL WORLD. A world of wonder and beauty beyond imagination. Wherever we turn in the natural world we are overwhelmed with that mysterious presence seen in the stars of the night sky, in the colors of the sky at dawn, in the movement of the wind through the trees, in the fragrance of the flowers by the wayside.

These experiences in the outer world are needed to awaken our inner world, for without the outer world our imagination would have no images, our minds would not be activated with the wonder that causes us to think about life in some meaningful manner. Nor would our need for intimacy with some larger world of meaning be fulfilled. Eventually there is only the one world with two dimensions, the world of mind and the world of matter. Neither exists without the other.

Yet somehow we have grown estranged from the most obvious aspects of the world around us. We have turned a world of wonder into a world to be used. We might even say that *use* for some form of human comfort or simply for economic benefit has become our primary experience of the world about us. Such is the source of the devastation that we have brought upon the entire planet. We have made the earth so toxic in its soils, its waters and its atmosphere that the various life systems begin to disappear.

Finally we have begun to notice the misery that we are bringing both upon the planet in its physical functioning and upon the human soul in its spirit functioning. We begin to reflect on the kind of a world that we are leaving for our children.

John Cock has seen and understood all this with a unique clarity of perception. In response to the urgency of the situation he has written a book that provides specific guidance for restoring a more valid human relationship with the world about us. For what is needed is something more than technologies that diminish the attrition we are imposing on the natural life system. What is needed is closer to the conversion process of the great religious transformations.

Such is the benefit of this book of meditations. With its guidance we might begin a new phase of existence in our own lives with the hope that the primacy of *use* in our relation with the natural world will be replaced with a primacy of appreciation for what the natural world tells us: I will feed you, I will clothe you, I will shelter you, I will heal you; only do not *use* me in a way that degrades me, a way that prevents me from awakening in you those wonderful inner qualities of wonder, beauty and intimacy.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry is the renowned cultural historian whom *Newsweek* calls “the most provocative figure among [the] new breed of ecotheologians.” He is also the author of *The Dream of the Earth* and co-author of *The Universe Story*.

# Preface

*The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, the latest book by Thomas Berry, has been a guiding light for me during the past year. I have read many of his other books, but the time was just right for this one. Maybe it's the title, that phrase "the great work," that has done it. Colleagues I know have been captivated by that phrase as well. Maybe we intuit "the great work" has pronounced the consensus that we all knew but did not know until someone like Thomas said it. That's the role of the poet or the sage. Thomas has been talking like this for decades, relentlessly saying what has needed to be said until the likes of me become believers. What deserves my life more than the "intercommunion of the universe"? I've been waiting a lifetime for someone to say that. He has sounded the call.

Having gotten to know Thomas here in Greensboro has made me really listen, I'm sure. Listening to him speak, deep conversations over meals, visiting him at his hermitage, talking about his latest writing projects, and reading some of his chapter drafts for his next book have helped me to know firsthand his passion for the universe, his first love. The universe calls him and he responds with the power of his being. He is truly a vocationed man. He is a mentor and my candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize for All Species, including the human.

Brian Swimme, his gifted student, has captured the wisdom and compassion of Thomas exquisitely well in that little book *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*, where the character THOMAS (after Berry) is in dialogue throughout with YOUTH ("to remind us that the human species is the youngest, freshest, most immature, newest species of all the advanced life forms in the planet," p. 19). Like that youth asking questions, I have listened hard to Thomas explain the awesome wonders and the nonsensical suffering of nature, and his big vision for the universe.

I do believe him and have felt compelled to add my voice. The question for me is How do we stay motivated once we have heard the call and joined the movement of those who care for the universe? It's a

question of deep motivation and re-motivation for helping to build and sustain this movement of movements. I sincerely hope this book of meditations will be motivating to that end.

Who are the audiences I want to read this book?

- those who are *secular-religious*
- those who seek depth quality of life
- those who yearn for their faith symbols to make sense
- those who are praying for the reform of religions
- those who are sensing after a new story of reality
- those who seek a *new spirit mode* for the planet
- those who intend renewal of their social vehicle
- and those who know Spirit is always already present.

Others will talk about scientific implications, global/local strategies, implementing systems, and the like. I want to talk about the spirit motivation for the *great work*: its Spirit source, basic understandings and interpretations of Spirit reality that can be deep motivation for all people, and an articulation of the *great work* that is informed by a post-modern sense after religious tradition and by Thomas' new story of the universe.

Further, I call these "forty *meaty* meditations," by which I do *not* mean something to read in three minutes at breakfast, like a little devotional book, or something called soup. I want us to think hard together once a day for forty days, if that is the choice, and to reflect with pencil in hand—seriously, for who can think of no more serious subject? It wouldn't hurt if a few of these meditations took a whole hour, but most should take less than thirty minutes. Maybe these are early-morning, lunchtime, or late-night meditations, whenever is the best time for self-consciously stopping the day to really meditate. Take the two-page readings seriously, but the reflection questions more seriously. I hope you will find out much about yourself and your role in the creation process.

Finally, I have written these meditations out of the following presuppositions regarding motivation for the *great work*:

1. Creation is good.
2. Devolution is as possible as evolution.
3. We have all we need to care for all.
4. The universe story is written.
5. The universe call is sounded.
6. Every individual longs to be a part of a *great work*.
7. A movement of humans is necessary.
8. This is a quest worthy of our lives.

What it will take for us humans to care authentically for the planet and the universe *is* the practical Spirit concern of our time.

And everybody is involved, including the children. Back in the ghetto on the West Side of Chicago, where both of our boys went to the Fifth City Preschool, one of their favorite songs at the beginning of the day was *I Love Fifth City* (tune, *I Love the Flowers*):

I love Fifth City,  
I love the planet Earth,  
I love this day in time,  
I love the universe,  
I'm always ready to see this world of ours,  
I tell you, man, I like it here,  
I tell you, man, I love it here.  
(*boom di yada, boom di yada, boom di yada, boom di yada*)

Substitute your own community or city name, for it is a great song for motivating children and enlisting them into the movement of *those who care for the universe*. Now our grandchildren like to sing it, especially the *boom di yadas*. I trust the message will dig itself deep into their imaginations and come forth repeatedly to re-motivate them for the *great work*, for this movement is eternal.

John Cock  
Greensboro, N.C.  
October 2000

# Motivation for the Great Work

*So may the enterprise of the Universe, . . . for as long as you are alive, become your own enterprise. This . . . is our new Decalogue.*

—Nikos Kazantzakis (*Saviors of God*, p. 118)

## **Why We'll Probably Be Too Late to Save the Planet**

**Growth in the ozone hole despite 13 years of limiting CFCs suggests that pollution curbs take decades to have any effect**

When it comes to the environment, the good news is that we are more aware of the effects of our behavior than we were a few decades ago. The bad news is that even once global warming reaches crisis proportions too difficult for U.S. leaders to ignore, any corrective measures we then allow them to take may well take several more decades to make any difference. . . . Slashing carbon gas outputs will ultimately demand lifestyle changes in America, but no politician wants to be the bearer of bad tidings. Which means that if the worst fears of environmentalists prove true, it may be decades too late [to avert a climate-change catastrophe] by the time we're prepared to change our ways.

—**TIME.com**, Sunday, September 10, 2000

*We waver today  
between two desires:  
to serve the world  
or to go on strike.*

—Teilhard de Chardin (*Meditations*, p. 68)

# *Prologue*

## ***Historical context for the Great Work***

The following very brief historical summary is context for the next great human leap in our evolution as the universe community, as Thomas Berry reminds us in the foreword. Intellectually we seem to know that the universe is awaiting our decision to take caring responsibility. But intellect does not a deed make.

As we begin to frame the *great work*, let us consider meaning shifts over the last two millennia of western civilization. Three general periods are obvious: pre-modern, modern, and post-modern.

*The pre-modern period of Human Truth, for about the past 1650 years.* The focus of the search for meaning was human understanding, freighted by a religious story intending to articulate a system of meaning to enable humans to answer life's questions. This period came forth with great religions and the humanities. Symbols for this period can be Christianity, Islam, and the printing press.

*The modern period of Scientific Truth, from about 1650 to 1920.* The focus of the search for meaning was human progress, freighted by the scientific story intending to invent a world in which humans master their environment. This period came forth with great inventions and studies emphasizing the sciences. Symbols for this period can be the industrial revolution and political revolutions that birthed democracies.

*The post-modern period of Universe Truth, from about 1920 to well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* The 20<sup>th</sup> century began under the banner of progress, but eventuated in the deaths of over 100 million humans killed during the wars of the century and the trend toward depletion of the Earth's natural resources. The focus of the search for meaning has been universe reconciliation, freighted by the universe story intending to weld Earth systems in order that humanity embrace and care for all, and in so doing care for itself better. Besides world wars, this period came forth with technological and biological breakthroughs, global consciousness,



and studies emphasizing the spiritualities. The *post-modern* symbols can be the theory of relativity, the atom bomb mushroom, and the Earthrise.

The Earthrise image not only points to the unity of the Earth but also to the universe context for the Earth. Our consciousness about our fundamental relationships is forever recast with that picture taken from out in the universe itself—therefore, more than worth the cost of the flight. Little did we know that NASA was revolutionizing our primal images and occasioning depth change. Spirit uses anything and everything to have its way with us, be it ancient Chalcedon or NASA.

### *The dynamics of the Spirit source for the Great Work*

The *great event* of Spirit graciously affirms and accepts our lives as they are. Every person has experienced this revelatory event, though differently, and is brought to a new experience and consciousness of unity with the Ground of Being, other beings, and with oneself.

What is this Ground of Being? The phrase “in being” informs us. We are *in being*. Everything that is, is *in being*. We are grounded in being: born within it, raised within it, sustained in it, at one with it, regardless. Being is our parent, making all creatures brothers and sisters. Is this literal? I believe so. If we are *in being* with everything that is, we are beings of Being itself, a part of being, and part of all beings. All are one, for all are in being.

Can we go out of being? No, for non-being is even part of being. We are held in being eternally. This is our ultimate reality as creatures of being—no getting away from it, though we are unaware of it for periods of time until the *great event* again makes us deeply conscious of who we really are.

Our being at one with the Ground of Being puts us also at one with other beings and with ourselves, when we are brought to see clearly that *all is one reality*. The essence of the *great communion* is the knowledge of our spiritual oneness with all that is in being. Knowing, believing, and rehearsing our unity, we participate in the *great communion* of being. As Berry says, “Nothing is itself without everything else.”

Then it seems natural for us to do something with this great understanding of our unity in Spirit: a *great work* of reconciliation with

and on behalf of all that is. This actual doing may look like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission instigated by Mandela and Tutu in South Africa, a universe story by Thomas Berry, a universe seminar by Brian Swimme, a worship experiment by Matthew Fox, a fast by Mahatma Gandhi, a march by Martin Luther King, Jr., an ecumenical movement by Joseph Mathews, a care structure for the dying in Calcutta by Mother Teresa, a sit-in by African-American college freshmen in Greensboro, North Carolina, where I live.

These people have experienced the *great event*, have participated in the *great communion*, and have done the *great work*. They have been self-conscious people of Spirit. Whether a part of a latent, loosely knit, or highly structured spirit force, they have chosen their calling to bring others to self-conscious oneness with being and even to invite them to become part of the great Spirit movement of their time, locally to universally—to be about the *great communion* and *great work* of re-creation and transformation out of the *great event* of grace.

Grace is the underlying reality of the *great work* of re-creation, and the *great communion*, or complicity with Spirit, is our part in it.

### *Understandings and interpretations that motivate*

Bad spirituality is one of the underlying contradictions to the *great work* of universe reconciliation. All interpretations and practices of spirit are not motivating relative to the *great work*.

For example, 780 followers of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda now have been found dead—stabbed, burned, and strangled—and disinterred from large common burial sites. This represents bad spirituality and criminal activity, absolutely not motivating for the *great work* of our times, except as a negative reminder.

What is good spirituality? Seeing life as it is as good, as a blessed gift. Good spirituality is grounded in reality. It is reconciling. It is universal in its focus. It is ecumenically inclusive.

As I wrote to Thomas Berry, the underlying contradiction of our time has to do with spirituality:

February 25, 2000

Dear Thomas,

*After reading your cosmology of religion chapters, I articulate the human contradiction of our time as our separation from the universe through self-absorption with human fulfillment.*

*There are three manifestations of this contradiction:*

- 1) the human usury and diminishment of the resources of the universe;*
- 2) the human over-estimation of itself and consequent denigration of other life forms;*
- 3) the human misunderstanding of the locus and dynamics of spirituality.*

*Dealing with the third manifestation is the key to dealing with the other two and with the contradiction of our time:*

*spirituality is not so much a divine-human affair in which spirit is present primarily in the human realm as it is a divine-universe affair in which spirit is present in the universe realm, which includes the human;*

*spirituality is not only a mystical relationship with the divine but also a communion with the divine grounded in our communion with the universe;*

*spirituality is not so much a looking for spirit, assuming spirit is absent, as it is an awareness of spirit, assuming spirit is present;*

*spirituality is not only meditation and prayer but also contemplation of the universe;*

*spirituality is not so much an effort to achieve union with anything  
as it is our Yes to grace events happening in our universe;*

*spirituality is not only an interior state  
but also a sacramental mode of living.*

*Therefore, the great work of our time is a spiritual task—  
including economic, political, and cultural strategies and  
tactics—of re-contexting, re-imaging, goading, luring,  
motivating, training, and nurturing humans (beginning with  
the children)—to become intimate citizens of the sacred  
universe rather than guarded citizens of an exclusive  
nation, or superior-acting members of the human species.*

*Thomas, we give thanks for your vocation to propagate the  
sacred story of the universe that calls us humans forth to  
authentic fulfillment in the service of the **great work**.*

*Be it so.*

*John*

### ***Toward a new articulation of the Great Work***

The stories of our time are coalescing into the big story of the universe. *The Universe Story*, by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, is the best rendering of that story I know.

New life flows from new stories of reality that better describe our lives than the old stories. *Genesis* is our true story in many ways, (i.e., creation is good and it is our bounden duty to care for creation), but the seven days of creation and the inferred six thousand years since the creation moment are hardly scientific truth. This religious story must be enhanced by our post-modern story of the universe that is evolving like the universe itself. As we step into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nothing is

of more importance to our attitude toward and our responsibility for the universe, and all that is within it, than the story out of which we live.

The power of the universe story is birthing a universe movement. Berry writes, "History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people" (*The Great Work*, p. 1).

In summary, the *good life*, that we all were created for, is ours in proportion to our being the people of the *great event*, the *great communion*, and the *great work*. Let us consider this equation in the forty meditations that follow, and before each one sing the theology of the Chicago Fifth City Preschool song

***LIFE IS GOOD***

Tune: *Walk Right In*

Life is good and we can shout  
 With the sun and the moon and stars. . . . (repeat)  
 Everybody's talking 'bout the universe,  
 Let's all dance to life.  
 Life is good and we can shout,  
 With the sun and the moon and the stars, yeah man,  
 With the sun and the moon and the stars. Yeah!

and after each meditation sing the ethic of this Fifth City Preschool song:

***FREE TO DECIDE***

Tune: *Hi, Ho, Nobody Home*

Free, free, free to decide  
 What this world is going to be;  
 This imperative is ours  
 To be free, free . . . (repeat)

Sung or not, they are an appropriate spirit frame for our meditations together, for they are about praise and dedication.

# Forty Meditations

# 1 *My Creed for the Good Life*

WHAT MAKES SENSE TO ME FUNDAMENTALLY? As I try to formulate my personal creed for the *good life*, I begin with asking what is the truth about life. Out of my tradition, I am deeply informed by a Jew named Jesus, who spoke with great authority about *God*,<sup>1</sup> and who confronted people with the way, the truth, and the life. For nearly two millennia, those whose lives have been changed have brought change in his name.

In spite of absurd worldviews and discrepancies via the oral tradition in the New Testament, the good news about life and my life comes through loud and clear. The *word* of goodness keeps gracing me. Empowered by that *word*, I have sought to do the will of *God* by following in the faith of Jesus—I too have been called to give myself passionately on behalf of *God's* good creation. On this foundation, let me try to express my fundamental beliefs:

*I exist in the soul of creation.*

*Creation is blessed.*

*The humanistic worldview devalues our lives, for Spirit is the pervasive reality of life.*

*Sin is separation, lack of communion.*

*Salvation is communion with all that is.*

*We humans share in the equality of all beings.*

*Revelation began at least fifteen billion years ago, and the universe itself is an expanding revelation.*

*The great event is at the heart of the revelatory process—or grace motivates the universe.*

*Faith in the goodness of life is the authentic response of the creature.*

*The communion of all beings is the universal religious, of which each religious group can be a microcosm.*

*Love, a gift of grace, is the glue of the universe.*

*Sacrifice on behalf of any part of the universe is the essence of love.*

*And life is resurrectional.*

These fundamentals of life make sense to me. Yet, I keep reminding myself—lest I devalue the way life is and relapse again into humanism—that everything has its context, even the universe. The ultimate context is always the eternal *Spirit*. This *One* alone has no context, no referent, and is from everlasting to everlasting.

With this context, I state my creed as simply as possible:

*The good news—“Creation is very good!”—  
was in the beginning,  
is now,  
and ever shall be.*

*Therefore, to live fully  
. . . is to say Yes to grace  
(great event),  
. . . is to be in communion with all  
(great communion),  
. . . is to live on behalf of creation  
(great work).*

*Be it so.*

<sup>1</sup> **Note about “God”:** Throughout these meditations I will italicize the word “God” so that we be conscious that we are using poetry; so that we be conscious that the Mysterious Power we dare to name is *in* but not *of* this universe—transcends literal images and language; so that we be clear how limiting it is for us to refer to “God” as “He” or “She” or “It”; and so that we be clear how inadequate our language is, especially when dealing with things of the Spirit.



***Reflection***

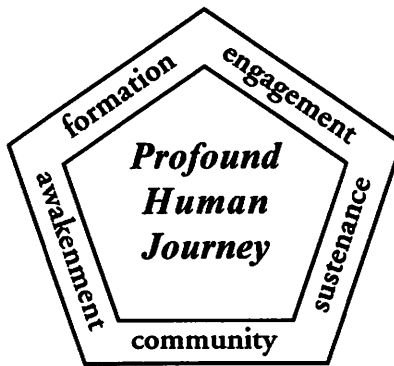
1. Life to me is *bad, not bad, good, or very good*.
2. I check the components of the author's italicized list of *fundamentals* that make sense to me.
3. I add my own fundamentals:
  - 
  - 
  - 
  -
4. I state *my* creed as simply as possible:

## 2 *The Profound Human Journey*

### *Five Dynamics*

THE PROFOUND HUMAN JOURNEY is the life we are created for. Most of us humans most of the time, I'm afraid, do not live the human journey profoundly. Yet, to some degree, we all do. Where do we learn about this journey? In large part from the exemplary lives of leaders of our human race and their encounters with the deeps of life.

The Order: Ecumenical devised the pentagon design below to describe the *profound human journey* dynamics of 1) *community*, 2) *awakening*, 3) *formation*, 4) *engagement*, and 5) *sustenance*. They are not necessarily sequential, as numbered, but dynamically interact. (The following five meditations treat these five dynamics in more detail.)



“Holy Ground” can be an archetype for the *profound human journey*. Let us use the familiar Moses story to illustrate these five dynamics. In that *awakening* moment, Moses saw through the burning bush to the heart of being and understood *community* and *sustenance* as he heard “I AM is with you.” There he was *awakened* and called to prepare himself—*formation*—for the great *engagement* of “Free MY people.” Is it any wonder he took off his shoes, prostrated himself, and covenanted with that power that creates this journey?

Thomas Berry writes, “In and through this [universe] community we enter into communion with that numinous mystery whence all things depend for their existence and their activity” (“The Cosmology of Religions”). Like Moses, in this life, in this universe—right before our eyes as we are doing our ordinary job—we experience an awesome moment that says to us that we are for sure in 1) *communion* with that which is the be-all and end-all of our journey. At the same time we discover communion with the universe through a scrubby bush on a piece of dirt. This scrubby bush used to be an *it* but is now a *thou*, worthy of reverence, for it is where we meet the “numinous mystery.” In the meeting at the bush, holy community reigns as the profundity of our human journey.

Like Moses, our Holy Ground experiences become the symbol of our 2) *awakening*. Such transparent events transform our very way of existence. A simple shepherd is now called to be “on a mission from *God*”: “Go and free my people enslaved in Egypt.” We must be *awakened* to profound humanness; we do not achieve it.

Like Moses, after being awakened by the *Holy*, we are spiritually prepared through 3) *formation*, that stage between call and engagement when we are made ready to do the *great work*. Like Moses, we understand ourselves as “nobodies” who cannot begin to do the mission assigned. We are not equipped. Moses says, “I am a poor speaker.” In spite of our resistance, our strange training orders go like this: “Worship on this mountain. I will instruct you as we go. Above all, learn this, ‘I AM is with you.’”

As Moses took on his 4) *engagement*, his *great work*, to set free *God’s* people in that day, we are commissioned to free all people today—from human-centered to creation- and Spirit-centered—so that they might care for all. The mysterious “I AM” commandeered Moses and led him to the land of bondage, then led him and the people out through the sea of liberation. We too are commandeered for the same *profound human journey*.

But, like Moses, we lose our way on the journey, become idolatrous and will not listen to and commune with the *Holy*. We must be re-motivated and replenished in spirit by going back up the mountain to receive the new decalogue and the new covenant; by coming down to

re-consecrate ourselves; by meticulously crafting and abiding at the “Tent of the Lord’s presence”; and by receiving manna and fresh “water from the rock” as we journey.

We begin our spirit journey at Holy Ground, where the *Holy* communes with us, awakens us, forms us, engages us, and sustains us in *the great work*. Holy Ground is the origin, center, and omega point for us and the good creation.

From that day at Holy Ground when Spirit became conscious to Moses—and us—the *Holy* has been with us the whole journey, making it profound by calling us to “Finish MY work.”

### **Reflection**

1. Other names for the five marks of the *profound human journey* are
  - 1) Community \_\_\_\_\_
  - 2) Awakening \_\_\_\_\_
  - 3) Formation \_\_\_\_\_
  - 4) Engagement \_\_\_\_\_
  - 5) Sustenance \_\_\_\_\_
2. A time I really experienced *community* was
3. A time I really experienced *awakening* was
4. A time I really experienced *formation* was
5. A time I really experienced *engagement* was
6. A time I really experienced *being sustained* was
7. I write a brief reflection on *my profound human journey*.

### **3** *Community: The Great Communion*

#### *Dynamic One of the Profound Human Journey*

LIKE MOSES, we experience an awesome moment that gets said to us that we are for sure in *communion* with that which is the be-all and end-all of our journey.

Some say *time, space, matter, and energy* are all there is. Put together, these are hardly the grand total of all that is. Over, under, and permeating them is the numinous mystery, as Berry says, without which they are but so much stuff. With the presence of Spirit, they are enlivened: once an *it*, now a *thou*. The difference is Spirit.

The *great communion* keeps humans honoring creation by saying, “I give thanks for your being.” In India, with hands pressed together, people bow to greet each other with “Namaste,” meaning, “I bow to the Spirit in you.” This is the essential expression of what I mean by the *great communion*: transparently, through what is *other*, we see and come to experience the reality of Spirit.

As transparency happens, what was not apparent suddenly shows through, is revealed. Let us rehearse a few illustrations of the millions of transparent moments that bring us to communion. One gazes at a flickering candle flame and encounters the transparent truth that light shines in darkness, probably all the time. One watches an ant colony do its work and sees through transparently to team effectiveness. One reads the Psalms and transparently becomes David railing at the Lord. One holds a new baby and encounters the transparent event of joy, always present but seldom experienced. One watches the movie *Judgment at Nuremberg* and sees clips of bulldozers pushing thousands of naked bodies into mass graves for gassed Jews; those clips go transparent to the slaughter of the tribe and we experience righteous rage. One sings a simple love song and discovers that s/he is singing to all that is. One sees the African Children’s Choir, who go transparent to all the African children who died of AIDS before they reached age twelve. One looks at the Earthrise on TV and sees through to her/his real home. I hold the hand of my dying mother, whose last words are “John, I love

you!”—I see through to the reality of love.<sup>1</sup>

All is transparent to Spirit. Every piece of creation is transparent to Spirit; therefore, every piece of creation is sacred. With the gift of this awareness, we begin to understand how the *great communion* begins and blesses creation. If all is transparent to Spirit, then time, space, matter, and energy are transparent to Spirit.

Martin Buber, the greatest Jewish thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote about the dialogic between *I* and *thou*, and suggests that we mostly treat everything and everybody as an *it* rather than a *thou*, and thereby prove our blindness and insensitivity to the underlying reality of Spirit that is revealed through all.

If all is transparent to Spirit, then we have the foundation for the community of all beings. We see what St. Francis saw—animal, vegetable, mineral; time, space, matter, energy; events, relationships, and experiences—that all are kin to us. In his hymn *All Creatures of Our God and King*, we meet “brother sun,” “sister moon,” “brother wind, air, clouds, and rain,” “sister water,” “brother fire,” “dear mother earth,” “thou, our sister, gentle death,” *etcetera*.

They are kin to us because we all are creatures revealing Spirit, our common denominator, all equal in the eyes of the Spirit, who shows no partiality—except to each piece of creation, each creature.

And when we are asked what is our purpose for being, we might recite out of an updated catechism, “to love and glorify that Spirit forever, and all that it births, sustains, unites, and renews.”

The *great communion* is with the Spirit that we meet in creation, in Spirit’s creatures, all sacred every one.

<sup>1</sup>This paragraph comes from my book *The Transparent Event*, pp. 163-64.

**Reflection**

1. Examples of *thous* that most people treat like *its* are
2. *Thous* that I treat as *its* are
3. I have trouble being in communion with
4. Once I treated \_\_\_\_\_ (group) as an *it*, until
5. Once I treated \_\_\_\_\_ (person) as an *it*, until
6. Once I treated \_\_\_\_\_ (non-person) as an *it*, until
7. What I've learned about communion/community from this meditation and reflection is

## 4 *Awakening: The Great Event*

### *Dynamic Two of the Profound Human Journey*

PAUL TILLICH has articulated a profound description of human awakening. He and the Christian tradition call it the event of grace: the *great event*. Yet, this event is human before it is religious, meaning it has happened to every human who has ever lived.

[When *grace* strikes] *a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying:*

*'You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!'*

*If that happens to us, we experience grace.*

*After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. . . . [N]othing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presuppositions, nothing but acceptance.*

—*Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 162<sup>1</sup>

We all experience grace. In the midst of our most agonizing separation from ourselves, other beings, and from the *Ground of Being* (Tillich's phrase), we sometimes at that moment hear "You are accepted!" New life with a new consciousness breaks in. We are awed when grace strikes. We are the same, yet transformed, with a *changed heart*, as Judaism describes our transformation. We experience forgiveness, just as we are. All we are asked to do is simply accept the fact that we are accepted. And if we accept, say *Yes*, we respond in faith. Only this event of grace justifies us, puts us back together again, though all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot. This put-back-together-ness that we experience in the midst of our sensing ourselves coming apart at



the seams—being deeply separated—is the gracious reunion or reconciliation with the Spirit at the heart of life. In spite of ads to the contrary, life doesn't get any better than the reunion we experience in the *great event*.

The *great event* has happened to me innumerable times. Once it happened when I lay on my bed in the ghetto on the West Side of Chicago, feeling especially sorry for myself, feeling trapped in an seemingly impossible mission. It was winter, a dark gray day. As I sighed deeply over and over, I became aware of my breathing. Its pattern held my attention. Then came "You just keep on breathing, don't you, John? What sustains your breathing sustains you, trapped or not. You just are." That was a memorable moment of transformation for me, for I accepted my just-being-there as a supreme gift. I got up, gave thanks, and went back to work, whistling, as I remember. This is only one of hundreds of moments of grace I can recount, and not the most awesome.

We all have experienced the power of life's *great event*, in small ways and big. Again, it is life's *great event*, belonging to no one and happening to everyone. To call it religious is quite understandable. Secular and religious, the *great event* keeps happening to all who are conscious of being alive, reminding us that we are accepted by the heart of life, that we are at one with life as it is, given.

This *great event* I also call the *transparent event*, meaning it reveals what really is. What was not apparent suddenly shows through, is revealed. We come to see what really is. Being given to see transparently the heart of life—in nothing special and in everything in particular—points to the understanding that each piece of creation, including each person, is revealing. We are given to see clearly the truth that all is good, that life is good, and that we are good because we are part of the good creation. This transforming truth is made known to us in the *great event*.

And what is our proper response: *Yes*.

<sup>1</sup> Paragraph divisions added.

**Reflection**

1. Other words for “great event” in this meditation besides “grace” are
2. Tillich’s poetry reminds me of
3. Qualities of the *great event* besides “acceptance” are
  - 
  - 
  - 
  -
4. An experience of the *great event* in my life, and what occasioned it, was
5. This was a reconciling and transforming event in that it
6. What newness came out of this event?
7. Why call this event “great”?

## 5 *Formation*

### *Dynamic Three of the Profound Human Journey*

TO BE ON THE PROFOUND HUMAN JOURNEY IS NOT NATURAL, but a matter of faith, which is the *Yes* decision to the call to be faithful to the heart of the universe, to be servant to the universe itself. Between the *vocational call* and the *great work* is the dynamic of *formation*, or getting prepared as Moses trained in Egypt. We can talk about this preparation as several kinds of profound training: depth consciousness, vocational, and leadership.

*Depth consciousness training* is a radical retraining for most of us who have grown up on reduced notions of progress, success, and happiness. We need to discover that *progress* has to do with authentic communion of all the parts of creation, not some utilitarian measurement of production. We need to discover that *success* is not what *I* do but what *we* do together, and, again, only in relation to authentic communion of all the parts of creation. We need to discover that *happiness* is not the result of what we know and do, but what we *be*: happiness is a matter of a content heart/soul that comes from a right relationship with the Center of Being. I am a child of grace, I am a child of the universe, and I am very content to be who I am, like a baby kangaroo in mother's pouch.

*Vocational training* is not at all what our society means by job preparedness. The vocational questions are How is one trained to think history-long and universe-wide? How is one trained to pray over Jerusalem all night long? and How is one trained to do deeds of equality and reconciliation? Vocation is not about making a living but about doing a radical and unconditional deed on behalf of all that is.

Then there is *leadership training*. How do we get an Abraham trained to build a people after he has been to Bethel? How do we get a Moses trained to lead a people through the wilderness for forty years? How do we get a Gandhi trained to free India. How do we get a Teresa trained to care for those dying on the streets? How do we get a Mandela trained to reconcile a nation? Not by a few neat gimmicks learned in a

few hour sessions of so-called leadership training. These leaders were not puppets of some deity. Their interiors were formed through soulful reflections on the experiences and mysteries of life: often painful training.

This world knows exemplary formation models: journeying girls and boys to become leaders of the church and religious orders, journeying boys to be the Dalai Lama, journeying boys to become samurai warriors, journeying boys to become kings and girls to become queens.

But we are talking about preparation for the *great work* of proclaiming the goodness of life and of expending oneself for the cause of the intercommunion of the universe. A person in profound preparation must be covenanted to this mission of proclamation and intercommunion and covenanted to a community dedicated to the same mission. A person in formation must know what the world knows about humanities, sciences, and spiritualities through her/his rigorous studies. And s/he must be practicing the art of standing at the Center of Being through solitary and corporate exercises of deepest reflection. These seem to be basic training requirements for the *great work* at hand.

Those helping to train persons for this *great work* must be about the *great work* themselves, must have learned formation prowess, and must create and use transformative formation methods.

Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, as he caught the vision of the servant force for *God* and the church, knew that the Xaviers could not stand in their *great work* on the other side of the world for a lifetime without the incredible formation of their interior life. Therefore, he prepared them foundationally, as “pillars of iron” (*Jeremiah* 1:18-19), knowing that *one* leads the *ten* who train the *hundred* who catalyze the *thousands*. And Ignatius sent them out with the now famous Ignatian model for their regular retreats, which took them to the Center of Being and back. It seems to have worked.

The awakened are called to be about the *great work* of our time, yet we for the most part have not prepared them well. How do we train more profound leaders, knowing they don’t just miraculously arise? How do we insure they will not crash and burn early on in their noble endeavors? What are the authentic formation structures and methods that people of the call need before going forth to stand as pillars of iron for a lifetime of service?

**Reflection**

1. I list other historical formation structures/methods of note

- 
- 
- 

2. I list exemplary formation structures/methods around today

- 
- 

3. I recall formation structures/methods that have been most helpful for me in my journey

- 
- 
- 

4. Reflections about my formation journey I would want to share with others are

- 
- 

5. I feel I am ready for the *great work* because

6. What I need to be better prepared for the *great work* is

7. My reflection about my formation journey thus far is

## 6 *Engagement: The Great Work*

### *Dynamic Four of the Profound Human Journey*

THOMAS BERRY, author of *The Great Work*, said at his book signing at the Greensboro Barnes and Noble, December 1999, that neither the birds, the fish, the plants, the forests, nor the land has a bill of rights. Only some humans have a bill of rights, and because of this, much of the non-human parts of the universe are suffering immensely. Who formally represents the rights of the non-voting universe in congresses or parliaments? Sure, they have their spokespersons—Thomas is one of their greatest—but the suffering intensifies to the immeasurable detriment of us all, for they and we are this universe together.

To update John Donne's poem, "No human is an island, entire of itself; every human is a piece of the planet, a part of the universe; if soil be washed away because of no trees, we all are the less; any species' death diminishes me; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee"—it tolls for all.

We are not only our brother's keeper, we are our river's keeper. Or as St. Francis knew, every piece of creation is our brother and sister. Living out of that reality, he showed saintly reverence for all. How do we begin to communicate such reverence for the universe to our young people so that they will never forget their *great work* of showing reverence for the universe, including *human* reconciliation. As Thomas says, "It takes a universe to educate a child. A universe to fulfill a child." The other species seem to operate out of such reverence, at least mutual respect. We keep forgetting, or acting as though we never really knew. I can imagine Albert Schweitzer saying as a young man, "If reverence for life seems irrelevant, it is because it has been poorly presented. I will change that." That is the manifesto-style of passion for the *great work*.

With that style we will set straight any misunderstanding from *Genesis* that we are to take dominion over the earth as human rulers. The earth is not a whore to be used as we will. She is our bride of one flesh. Our *great work* is to care for her our whole lives just as she cares for us. We are to sacrifice for her as she does for us. She is not created to be a slave to our needs, but a partner in service.

Can we not remember, as Thomas reminds us, that those walks in the woods, those times at the beach when we contemplate the rolling waves, are sublime gifts of the universe to us? Can we imagine what it is like to live in the highest village in the Himalayas and to be awed by that view each day? I have looked at and off the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and North Carolina—one of our oldest ranges—throughout my life and have been deeply awed. I returned from a year in India one late spring and flew down the Shenandoah Valley, from Dulles to Roanoke, and could hardly breathe from the ecstasy of that lush and majestic view of my native vale. Such beauty calls us back to intimate care for the universe, to be at one with her. In love we stand before our *great work*.

And out of survival we stand before our *great work*. This is a new day. No longer is loving the earth a good idea, but is that without which we will not live into the future as a species. As the earth and its atmosphere goes, so goes humanity. For we are one body, one flesh, with the universe. Our unity is our gift and our demand. “One for all and all for one,” or “We all go down together”: old sayings, still true. We have to be grasped by a new vision of reality, we have to ritualize that vision, we have to create a disciplined style as individuals and as a human community to care for that which is our gift and our *sacred responsibility*, what the word “dominion” means at its best in *Genesis*. We are stewards, guardians, caretakers in covenant with the universe.

Lastly, we have to create new strategies and tactics to be about the business of caring powerfully and responsibly for the universe we are. We must stand guard against the ravages of economic interests who have forgotten, or never knew, that the bell tolls for them, also, especially if they abuse the rights of the universe, which take precedence over any nation’s, corporation’s, or individual’s rights. And we must take responsibility for any who shirk their responsibility. No longer can we stand by and watch anyone rape our universe body.

The *great work* of caring for our universe and our earth is our vocation, our calling, the major theme of our lives, both out of great love and great necessity. As Thomas suggests, we and the universe are fulfilled together, not separately. Mutual fulfillment is the only way.

Those searching for fulfillment, search no further, for your *great*

*work* is at hand. If someone asks, “What do you mean, ‘The *great work*’?” tell them as best you possibly can about the mutual fulfillment of the universe, that if the universe comes off, so do we, and conversely; if the universe is diminished, then so are we. Tell them and show them as best you can, for *The Great Work is Our Way Into the Future*, to use Thomas’ sub-title as well.

### ***Reflection***

1. I recall some intimate times with the earth/universe, i.e., the author’s plane ride down the Shenandoah Valley.

2. I recall times when the earth/universe was diminished, i.e., when acid pollution from neighboring states damaged our local trees.

3. I recall a time when I was angered enough to try to do something about the abuse done to our earth/universe, i.e., when Wal-Mart wanted to build a superstore across the highway from its original store in our small town and I spoke out at our city council meeting.

4. I recall times when I was a good steward of the earth/universe, i.e., when our scout troop planted a whole hill with tiny trees.

5. I reflect on my present stewardship of the earth/universe, of course including the human species.



## 7 *Sustenance*

### *Dynamic Five of the Profound Human Journey*

*You do not have your belief once and for all. Your belief . . . demands to be won anew with every new day. God gives us always just precisely so much faith as we need for the present day. . . . Either we receive it anew everyday, or it decays. One day is long enough to keep faith. Every morning brings a new struggle to push through all the unbelief, through all the littleness of faith, . . . to reach faith and wrest it from God. . . . Belief is a decision.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Testament To Freedom*, p. 295)

**FAITH IS A DAILY DECISION.** In the midst of community one is called to, formed for, and engaged in the *great work*. How does s/he stick to it day after day, being out there on the point between the *no longer* and *not yet*, where one intends to be? What sustains?

Spirit disciplines and structures are inventions of humanness to help sustain our lives in mission. In my memoir, I have brainstormed a list of comments about sustenance for mission when we were a part of the Order: Ecumenical:

- Daily, weekly accountability and absolution are essential to the human journey.
- Beginning the day with worship is the proper human stance. Even more regular reflection, i.e., the *canonical hours*, is possible.
- A high weekly celebration (House Church gathering) is essential to *esprit de corp*.
- Despair can be a creative dynamic of the grace event.
- We live out of symbols and images.
- We are reflective by nature and must reflect on life daily.
- Because of the impingement of the Mysterious Power in our lives, we can transcend our given situation and find meaning in it.
- We can decide to be or not to be a victim.
- Community is all-important to sustenance.

- There are no absolute answers in a relative universe. To want such  
is to want surety, which is an illusion.
- We operate out of the human dimensions of the archaic, the futuristic,  
the comprehensive, and the intentional (depth).
- We can play the necessary role out of our freedom.
- We only know the *word* if we can ground it in our human experience.
- Poverty, chastity, and obedience are human dynamics, not restricted  
to monasteries.
- Meditation, contemplation, and prayer are human dynamics, not  
restricted to the religious.
- Spirit resides in matter, or one can bleed the meaning out of any  
piece of creation or any situation, or matter is transparent to spirit.
- The land, river, mountain, and sea are primal symbols.
- We are our relationships, i.e., with the Ground of Being, with other  
beings, and with ourselves.
- Beholding, revering, and serving the Mysterious Power, that I call  
*God*, is the meaning of life.
- Constant rehearsal of the *word*—that *all* is good, *my life* is received,  
the *past* is approved, and the future is open—is that without which  
we cannot long endure.
- Spirit is always already present or the other world is in this world.

#### BRIEFLY, WHAT I LEARNED IN THE ORDER IS

*To live simply*  
*To love structure*  
*To live on behalf of*  
*To celebrate our living*  
*To reflect on the mystery*  
*To serve the shattered earth*  
*To dream the impossible dream*  
*To build the earth, the common earth<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> *Called To Be*, pp. 220-21.

***Reflection***

1. I underline spirit methods or reflections in the meditation that resonate with me.
2. Spirit methods that are especially sustaining for me these days are
  - 
  - 
  - 
  - 
  -
3. As I reflect on my list, I check the ones are not traditionally religious.
4. The type of spirit method that I sense I need to add to my list is what, and why do I think so?
5. The last time I was on a spirit life retreat was
6. The community that helps sustain me most is
7. “Spirit is always already present” gives me what clues about spirit methods that sustain?
8. Where might I go to find out about sustaining spirit methods?

## 8 *O Thou: God Language*

"[A]ll beings, not only our friends but also our enemies, not only humans but also animals and the inanimate [are to] be met with reverence, for all are friends in the friendship of the One. . . ." —H. Richard Niebuhr (*Radical Monotheism*, p. 126)

*Why am I turned off by the "John 3:16" signs at ball games?  
And by someone who tells me, "Only humans have rights!"  
Or tells me "All the Earth belongs to all!"—meaning usually  
All humans, at best, and the 15% of us with the most, at worst?*

*Why am I turned off by sexist language for God?  
If we choose either "he" or "she,"  
It seems to me we leave out most "its,"  
Which is a pretty big category,  
Bigger than "she" and "he"—speaking universally.  
Maybe "thou" is more appropriate,  
Experiencing that she/he/it are **thous** and not **its**,  
That is, if grace still happens, and unites us with  
God above God, all beings, and with self.*

*Thanks be for the depth of spirituality  
Beyond religion(s), no-religion, and sexes,  
That keeps on being the way it happens,  
At least fifteen billion years into our universe scenario.*

**WORDS ARE ONLY SYMBOLS** that point to some reality; therefore, all words are poetry. The poetry is not the reality itself, and if we think so, it is an idol. At one time the Hebrews of the Old Testament would not even use a word for *God* because it would limit *God* in some way. That's why *Thou* is a good name, and also a good prayer phrase, *O Thou*. *Thou* is not time, space, matter, or energy, but *Wholly Other*, yet shows up in all four. We experience the *Presence* of this power in the wind, which we cannot see but definitely experience as real.

Some call this other power the *Enemy*, or that which is out to

get us. Jesus called it *Abba*, which means *Father*, or *That Which Loves* all creation and wishes us nothing but good. Job in the Old Testament said, though this *Power* slay me, yet will I trust it. Jesus said at the time of his crucifixion, I leave myself in *Thy* hands. This is the best of the Jewish-Christian message: there is that *Mysterious Power* in life that brings us in and takes us out, yet we have found that we can trust it as the *One* who accepts us utterly and unconditionally throughout eternity—*God of Grace*. And that *Power* is the fundament of *the way life is*. We trust that *One* with our lives. Therefore, all reverence seems appropriate.

There are other names for *God*: *the Divine, Heart of Being, God Above God, Final Reality, Being Itself, the Ultimate, the Unconditioned, the Awesome, Ground of Being, Center of Being, the Holy, the Numinous Mystery, Mother, Great Goddess, God-Dess, the Source, No Thing, the All, the Force, the Silence, the Abyss, the Void, Great Emptiness, the One Spirit*—words that point to the ultimate power in life that is “verily not I,” as D. H. Lawrence has written, and words that point to *That Without Which* true life is not.

*Guidelines for naming God are*

- what makes deep spirit sense to us
- what’s worthy of our faith-commitment
- inclusiveness of all creation
- honors all faith traditions
- what will communicate

Let us remember, the name we choose is only a piece of poetry that in and of itself has no significance. What it points to, however, is of ultimate significance to our lives and to the life of all.

The other day, granddaughter Kaitlyn, almost five, asked her daddy who was God’s mother and daddy. Then she answered her own question: “I know, it’s a mystery.”

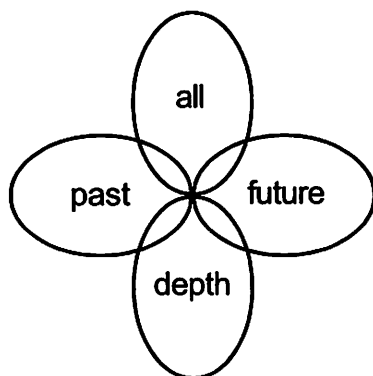
And grandson Nolan, two, has started folding his hands, bowing his head, and saying that profound blessing: “God is great, God is good. . . .”

*God* language goes on. We can’t stop it. But we can try to make sure it is not rote, that it points to the ultimate in our experience.



## 9 *Reality Is Not Small*

ALTHOUGH OUR HUMAN PROPENSITY is to live our lives out of small, manageable chunks of reality, we are called to live out of all that is. One way of trying to image total reality is to talk about the interrelatedness of time, space, matter, and energy. Another way is to talk about reality stated in the interdependent dynamics of the *past*, the *future*, the *comprehensive (all)*, and the *depth* dimensions of life. Standing self-consciously open at the center of these four, one senses after what it means to be a full human being.



How can I be a full human being if I do not sense after the immensity of the universe journey of some fifteen billion years? How can I be a full human being if I do not sense after universes coming into being faster and faster in this moment and even forever? How can I be a full human being if I do not sense after my relationship with every race, not to mention the millions of species in creation? How can I begin to be a full human being if I do not sense after the depth consciousness of humanity in our sixty thousand years of forging individual and community stories, symbols, and expressions about the meaning and wonder of life?

If I only seem to care about my religious tradition, then I am a reduced human being. If I only seem to care about myself, my family, my neighborhood, and my immediate environs, then I am a reduced human being. If I only seem to care about the future of my *human* species, then I am a reduced human being. If I only seem to care about the history of what has happened in my short life, then I am a reduced human being.

How do I begin to be sensitive to all that ever was, is, and ever shall be? How do I stretch my human sensitivity and that of others? These are the authentic human questions as I consider my role and responsibility in our life system, which is mysteriously vast in every direction: the past, the future, the comprehensive, and the depth. How do I stay wide open to the big picture, not just to my manageable picture of reality—which is extremely reduced, not fully real?

How can I say *Yes* to this part of reality and *No* to that part? How can I say *Yes* to my grandchildren and *No* to other species? *Yes* to Christianity and *No* to Islam? *Yes* to the U.S.A. and *No* to China? *Yes* to my family's history and *No* to the history of the African American? *Yes* to the future of humanity and *No* to the future of planet Earth? How can I say *Yes* to more cars and *No* to oil-based resources? How can I say *Yes* to my personal welfare and *No* to the personal welfare of Indonesians?

I am a part of all that is. All that is, is a part of me. I cannot reduce life down to "my reality," a contradiction in terms, for reality is reality. "My reality" is only a tiny part of reality, only one grain of sand.

As a human being, I am one with the past, the future, the comprehensive, and the depth. I am one with the universe, the Earth, communities, myself, and the heart of being. I am a microcosm of the whole and the whole is a macrocosm of me. All reality is my reality and I am one with all reality whether I want to be or not.

Reality is all there is. It is not small. When I reduce reality, I am a little crazy, meaning not fully living in reality, or living outside of reality. Therefore, the authentic prayer is, "Bring us to reality," so we experience the fullness and awesomeness of life.



***Reflection***

1. The most important thing that *ever* happened was
2. What I most dream about for the future is
3. The best image I have of the immensity of the universe is
4. My deepest experience of life is
5. When I gaze intently at the symmetrical, four-looped art form, what do I begin to see that I did not see at first.
6. Which one of the four (past, future, all, depth) reveals my limited picture of reality most?
7. I really like/dislike thinking this way because
8. My picture of reality is small/average/big? How so?
9. I intend to

## **10** *The Universe Is Where I'm From*

### WHAT'S GOING ON?

- ... the yearly cycle
- ... the seasonal cycle
- ... the monthly cycle
- ... the daily cycle
- ... the sunrise
- ... "bright, blessed day"
- ... the sunset
- ... "dark, sacred night"
- ... the moon and stars shining
- ... clouds forming and moving
- ... dew, rain, snow, sleet, hail
- ... wind at all velocities
- ... smells of cut grass and fire
- ... sounds of birds, the wind in the trees
- ... sight of mountains and oceans
- ... feeling of cold and heat

Just this is enough to make us know that we are a part of the universe, that we experience the universe.

Other fundamental gifts to us humans from the universe, over these fifteen billion years, are

- ... breathing
- ... emotions, i.e., joy, grief
- ... pain
- ... brain power
- ... reflecting
- ... talking
- ... singing
- ... walking
- ... dancing

- ... will power
- ... being loved
- ... loving
- ... being forgiven
- ... forgiving
- ... being cared for
- ... caring

We begin to get the picture of our creative abilities, all given, yet developed within the journey of the universe.

We are not made in the USA but in the universe. We know we are created with all this universe hardware and software, to do with as we choose, within limits.

And what can we choose to do? *We can build up or destroy*

- ... our body
- ... our mind
- ... our spirit
- ... our family
- ... our organizations
- ... our neighborhood
- ... our town or city
- ... our region
- ... our nation
- ... our united nations
- ... our planet
- ... our universe.

Phenomenal to me is the fact that I am—that I am finite, that I am related to everything, that I am past and future, that I am dependent and independent, that I am care, that I am freedom.

This is who I am and what's happening to me and in me, to everyone else, and in everyone else.

What's my natural response? Awe. Gratitude. Why? Because this is the way I am, a human being in this universe of mutual being—I *am a creation of being in being for being*. That's who I am.

When we lived in the ghetto on the West Side of Chicago, Senator

Charles Percy visited the Fifth City community redevelopment project. He bent down to talk to a preschooler and asked him, "Where do you live?" The three-year-old African American looked him in the eye and replied loudly, "The universe." The Senator gave the boy a quick smile and handshake, stood up, and walked away a little shaken. How was the Senator to know his question had set off the boy's opening ritual at preschool.

***Reflection***

1. Can I name one thing that did not come from the universe?
2. Can I name one being that is not a mutual being?
3. Who are my neighbors?
4. How many things are in the universe?
5. I write down five things in the universe for which I'm thankful.
  - 
  - 
  - 
  - 
  -
6. When was the last time the universe filled me with awe? (I recall the particulars of that occasion.)
7. When was the last time I realized the universe is my real home?
8. What song could I sing to the universe?

# 11 *I Am Religious*

*Lord, I feel you in the warmth of the sun and  
the cool summer rain.*

*I hear you in the song of the birds and ocean's roar.*

*I sense your power in a strand of DNA and your  
infinity in each new galaxy.*

*You surround me, Lord.*

—a universe prayer

PEOPLE TODAY ARE VERY LEERY of anyone who says he's religious. Everything religious is suspect until proven authentic, and that's as it should be, since so much of what is called religious appears inauthentic. Still, I get tired of being too quickly pigeonholed when I say, "I am religious," which I most certainly am.

Let me try to explain what I mean. "I am religious in the ecumenical sense." Coming from the Greek *oikoumene*, the word *ecumenical* means being in union with all that which is inhabited. The word *ecumenical* has been reduced over the centuries by the Christian religion, for example, through ecumenical councils in worthy attempts to be inclusive of all those who consider themselves Christian. But to be ecumenical is not just to be in union with different sects and denominations of Christianity, nor even different religions, nor even different cultures. We are also in union with different species and the whole created order. That is what I mean by *ecumenical*.

It is not that we *should* be in union with all that is, we *are* in union with all that is, and sometimes we are even aware of that fact, which is certainly beyond any one nation's constitutional understanding. All constitutions and all religions are reduced unless they include all that is. I will go further and say, I believe all that is, is sacred.

I have expanded my definition of *ecumenical* to be equivalent to all of created being, including the universe. Therefore, let me say, I am religious in the creational sense, which is the biggest context I can imagine and articulate. By attempting to be as inclusive as I can, I am also attempting to get beyond religious and cultural divisions that

increasingly lead to war and violation of all that is sacred.

In short, I am not a humanist, which has several reduced meanings for me. I am not just a Christian or a Methodist. Again, I *am* religious in the creational sense. I believe that all that has been created is very good. This is the bottom-line of what and why I write. So this is the way I wish to be pigeonholed.

What is the new common sense of what it means to be religious? Be it great suffering or ecstasy, be it great disappointment or elation, be it great stress or tranquility, the fullness, the richness, the worthwhileness, the very meaning of life is at the center of every event, experience, relationship in our living in this awesome and wondrous creation—if we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the sense to perceive its meaning.

Life, including each life, and creation are full to brimming over with wonder, possibility, and meaning, always there whether we are present to this ultimate reality or not. Sometimes each of us *is* present to and awed by what is really going on.

Being present to what really is, is the be-all and end-all of the spirit odyssey, journey, pilgrimage, or quest. Being present to what really is, is what I mean by being religious.

Each of us is called to be sensitive to and to care for the whole of life; each of us is called to be present to the Spirit that is nowhere if not everywhere; each of us is called to be aware of Spirit in nothing if not in everything. Each of us has a religious calling: to perceive and be aware of Spirit.

Entering the 21st century, the best universally popular poetry I know for what I mean by religious is from the theme song Louis Armstrong sings in *Good Morning, Vietnam*:

*I see skies of blue and clouds of white;  
The bright, blessed day, the dark, sacred night;  
And I say to myself, 'What a wonderful world.'*<sup>1</sup>

That is a religious song.

Maybe we are all more religious than we think, or let on.

<sup>1</sup> (George Weiss and Bob Thiele) Harold Square Music, Inc. on behalf of Range Road Music, Inc. and Quartet Music, Inc. (ASCAP).

***Reflection***

1. My list of some historical religious persons:

2. Some religious people I know:

3. Some qualities of a religious person are

- 
- 
- 
- 

4. I basically agree/disagree with the meditation's description of what it means to be religious.

5. I am/am not a religious person, because

6. For me to be religious I would

## 12 *The Way Life Is or Magic?*

### **GOD DID NOT PROMISE . . .**

long life  
good health  
financial security  
a marriage that works  
loving children  
a nice house  
a solid job  
sweet dreams  
no pain  
a good education  
kind in-laws  
responsible government  
safe cities  
no taxes  
good neighbors  
cessation of wars  
and the end of poverty.

*Job in the Old Testament was getting clear:* “Though God takes away my family, my possessions, and my health, yet will I trust him.”

*Paul got clear:* “Though Jesus’ way leads me to shipwreck, jail, persecution, and martyrdom on a cross upside down, yet I know that nothing can separate me from the love of God.”

*Jesus was clear:* “Let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.”

They found whom they could trust, who would not let them down, who would not let them go, who would go with them all the way.



*God did promise . . .*

to love us absolutely  
 to be with us no matter what  
 to bind up our deepest wounds  
 everlasting arms to catch us when we're falling  
 faithfulness amid our unfaithfulness  
 grace sufficient for every need  
 peace that passes understanding  
 a calling whether we want it or not  
 courage in spite of fear  
 purpose when we have lost our way  
 mercy without our ever asking  
 future when all seems impossible  
 balm for the deepest grief  
 forgiveness when we deserve none  
 more freedom than we will ever want  
 welcome home with open arms regardless  
 resurrection in this life  
 comfort when we are in greatest pain  
 refuge when the storms of life are raging  
 rest for the weariest  
 hope against hope  
 light in the darkest night  
 joy unspeakable

*. . . all this abundant life, but not as the world promises or giveth.*

Who gets in on these promises? All creation receives some, for example, grace and love. Universal holy writ is effulgent with the witness of those who cashed in on the rest of the promises of the *One*.

This type of traditional poetry still has power. Nothing is demanded except our utterly trusting the promises of *God* to be true and testing them to the limit, like Job, Paul, and Jesus did.

Rereading the poetry, we are faced with two possible interpretations: 1) *the way life is*, or 2) magic. For me, there is no magic in *God's* promises. My take: Life is good and full of possibility; I am free to serve *God's* creation. All that is required is my relentless *Yes*.

***Reflection***

1. Which of the non-promises (first list) do most people yearn for?
2. Which items of the first list do I wish were promised?
3. Which of the real promises (second list) do most people yearn for?
4. Which promises of the second list have I received?
5. At this time, I yearn for which promise of the second list?
6. The poetry I use for “God did not promise/God promised” is
7. I know there is no magic because
8. What Job, Paul, and Jesus knew in their hearts is
9. I experienced what they knew when I was

## 13 *Divisive Words*

*We have enough religion to make us hate, but not enough  
to make us love one another.*

—Jonathan Swift

IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY I am shocked when I pick up my former hometown newspaper and read that a local preacher is saying on the far-reaching local radio station that the Roman Catholic Church is evil; that the Bishop of Rome is the anti-christ; and that 60 per cent of all Roman Catholic priests have AIDS.

A local clergy took the radio preacher to task in the local newspaper and received at least eleven phone calls at his home supporting the radio preacher's beliefs with such comments as

- “Why are you standing up for them [the Roman Catholics]?”
- “We're Holiness people out here, not Catholics,” said one female caller before abruptly hanging up.
- “He [the radio preacher] said it, and he's a man of God.”
- When asked, one caller said she got some of her facts about the Church of Rome from the *National Enquirer*.
- “There are a lot of people around here who agree with him.”

Is there any wonder that religious wars are still going on today around the world, in spite of the Pope's recent confessions of the sins of the Roman Catholic Church through the ages and his plea for forgiveness; or in spite of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic formal reconciliation pact last year, 500 years after the Reformation?

How do we begin to get along and come together as Christians, much less as 6,000,000,000 citizens of the globe? As the radio preacher proved, it is easy to divide *God's* people. What we all know, it is hard to bring us together: does the preacher not know this is his *God-given* calling?

As an act of reconciliation, the radio preacher could begin by confessing his sins against Roman Catholics, the Pope, the priests, and the whole Christian church, and beg for forgiveness. Why would that

not be the Christian thing to do? Why would that not be following the admonition of the Holy Bible out of which he preaches and hears the holy command to repent face to face, maybe taking one of his thirty-minute radio programs to beg for forgiveness publicly?

And then maybe for extra penance he could preach out of the five chapters of the *First Letter of John* for the next forty weeks until he begins to believe that “If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. . . . The truth that Christ has given us is this: whoever loves God loves others also.”

If reconciliation does not begin in the hearts of those who understand they are called to be *God's* special instruments, then divisiveness will abound on Earth, at war with “*Thy* kingdom come.”

But it doesn't have to be this way. There is a power stronger than hate and war, the power at the heart of religion and life. Tillich articulates *First John* radically:

*It is a rare gift to meet a human being in whom love—and this means God—is so overwhelmingly manifest. . . . It is the presence of God Himself. For God is love. And in every moment of genuine love we are dwelling in God and God in us (The New Being, p. 29).*

***Reflection***

1. I recall examples of religious hate globally.
2. I have seen religious hate manifest itself locally in
3. I list how I harbor religious hate (e.g., I stereotype radio preachers)
4. What keeps religious hate alive in us all?
5. Where have I recently seen repentance for religious hate?
6. How have I repented of religious hate?
7. How can I—and will I—overpower hate with love?

## 14 *Two Visions*

I WAS READING THE BIOGRAPHY of one of my meditative council, Carlyle Marney, to Lynda last night as we retired. I was struck by the two conditions he put to the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, before he would come there as their pastor: *open communion*, anyone can come to the table of Jesus Christ, and *universal baptism*,<sup>1</sup> or any form of baptism is recognized (*A Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 41).

I woke up with two visions of our holy and right relationships.

***Vision One:*** Five billion non-Roman Catholics (one billion of whom are Protestant and Orthodox and say they too believe in Jesus Christ) jog up the aisles to receive communion and are *refused*. They jog back to their seats.

Then I saw six billion humans in a circle around the planet passing the loaf of bread down the line, breaking off a piece and giving it to the brother or sister standing beside, reminding each other that we can feast on the brokenness of life and our own broken lives, just as they are; then pouring wine for each other, spilling the wine into the next one's cup, reminding each other that although life is spilled out, we can drink every drop as the good life it is, and give thanks.

The circle is a symbol of our unity as citizens of common Earth. Each one is sustained in being. Each one is sustained by the other's passing the gifts of life on. Each one's existence, as it is, is received as part of the goodness of creation. Each one is equally part of creation and is its common heir. Each one is brother and sister to all the rest. Each one is responsible for each other, animate or inanimate. Each broken one is part of the wholeness of the universe, sustained by that *Power* in the universe.

*Vision Two:* There were close to two billion human young on planet Earth and nine trillion non-human young of everything from squirming tadpoles, birds fresh out of their shells, to newly born elephants. What a parade. We thought they were never going to finish marching down Main Street. We humans brought up the rear with a giant banner that read, “We last comers are also very good.”

Tell me that any creature, either human or not, thinks it got here on its own. Each is a gift from the universe, part of cosmic, interdependent generation. The symbol of *baptism* is in recognition of the fact of the graciousness that is at the heart of life: we have life as a gift—no qualifications. Must we go and spoil this symbol with some restrictive form or some set age for this rite to be performed? Let us simply celebrate the gracious gift to us that our lives are: nothing we created, or nothing we consent to have. We just be.

In sum, these two visions symbolize the way life is constituted by the nature of creation. They symbolize what is: (1) grace, (2) the gift of life, and (3) our predetermined unity.

*ANNOUNCEMENT: Let the open table begin. Let all creatures now come forward to be baptized any way chosen. May we use water, the common life-giving element.*

The universe allows for only a universally open table. That’s why some have chosen to call it the *common meal*. Likewise, the universe allows for only *universal baptism*, for we all are recipients of *God’s* grace, no question asked.

My take on the two visions: all religious rituals are *Godly* rituals if they are universal—no questions, no restrictions, no qualifications.

<sup>1</sup> *Universal baptism* is my phrase.

***Reflection***

1. I recall when I was initiated into my religion.
2. I remember stories around that event.
3. I recall when I have been excluded from a religious ritual.
4. I remember my feelings as a result of being excluded.
5. The most inclusive religious event I even participated in was
6. The most meaningful religious event I ever participated in was
7. The purpose of religion is
8. I am/am not very satisfied with my religious experiences.
9. What I most yearn for from my religion is



## 15 *What Got Him?*

plato told

him: he couldn't  
believe it (jesus

told him; he  
wouldn't believe  
it) lao

tsze  
certainly told  
him, and general  
(yes

mam)  
sherman;  
and even  
(believe it  
or

not) you  
told him: i told  
him; we told him  
(he wouldn't believe it, no

sir) it took  
a nipponized bit of  
the old sixth

avenue  
el; in the top of his head: to tell

him

—e. e. cummings (*lxl*, p. 88)

WHY IS IT only a nipponized bit of the old sixth avenue el train in the top of his head got him clear?

And what he was clear about? Was it that he would surely die? We all know that, at least intellectually. What got him was that he was not in charge of his existence. What got him was that life has a beginning and an end—that it is finite. Cummings in another poem says, “what Got him was Noth / ing.” What really got him was that life comes from *Nothing*—*creation is always out of nothing*, the Bible says—and that which is all powerful gives life and takes life away.

What got him, through the grace of a bullet in the top of his head—made from scrap metal sold to the Japanese by famous American entrepreneurs—was that this moment, and this moment . . . and this moment is a gift of life, each with a beginning and end, each given and each taken away. What got him was that any moment is a gracious gift of life in and of itself, and what got him clear was the pre-experience of his *final* conscious moment. The reality of *his* own death, not death in general, got him very clear.

We don’t know whether that was his last moment or not: whether the bullet only grazed his skull, whether the medic came and stopped the bleeding, or whether he walked away. Even so, in that moment of final reality, *he got it*.

Continuing Cummings’ story, if I may: our main character in the poem was made so clear by that bullet that he had to sit down. His legs went mysteriously wobbly. His pants were wet. His newest moment of life was exhilarating, yet filled with the deepest knowledge of fragility: there are more bullets out there. He was awe-filled with a mixture of fear and thanksgiving.

The *God*-awful truth got him. What got him was the realization that he could not ultimately depend on any *thing*. What got him was *No Thing*. The only proper relation to *No Thing* is thankfulness for the gift of one’s fragile life in the moment.

He was very clear momentarily and was therefore authentically human, living in proper awe. Understanding of life comes hard, awfully hard. But it does come, thank *God*.

***Reflection***

1. I remember my first encounter with death (e.g., my baby sister died when I was about four).
  
2. I remember the details of my most dramatic brush with death.
  
3. As I recall both 1. and 2., feelings I remember
  
4. Feelings that come now as I recall the events then
  
5. What got clear to me is
  
6. I never want to forget
  
7. The reason all this is so very important is

## 16 Christmas Letter<sup>1</sup>

*I STRUGGLE WITH THE QUESTION* Have you accepted Jesus into your heart? It seems simple to say, and makes a whole lot of sense besides, that when my heart is opened to truth, grace, or compassion—by great joy or great pain—then Christ has come into my heart. I think this is what we celebrate at Advent and Christmas, the coming of the Christ into our hearts: “where meek souls [or better, ‘open hearts’] receive him, still the dear Christ enters in,” as the carol goes.

My heart has been opened so many times to truth, grace, or compassion by an awesome encounter. Whatever the event or revelation, my heart has been awakened, strangely warmed, or blowtorched by the mystery of **God’s word**—hundreds of times:

- taking Christmas baskets to “Colored Hill” with Daddy as a boy
- when I “fell in love” with Lynda
- holding a new baby, especially John, Jeremiah, Kaitlyn, and Nolan
- flying down the Shenandoah Valley after a year in India
- hearing the majestic “Prologue” to Boïto’s **Mefistofele**
- seeing the movie **Gandhi**
- reading **The Dream of the Earth** by Thomas Berry
- attending the spirit-filled memorial service of a mentor, Lyn Mathews Edwards
- totaling my red VW Bug on I-94 and barely escaping death
- when a ghetto or village I work with picks up its life: 5<sup>th</sup> City, Jawale
- my boys’ pleading with me to stop smoking or I would die
- when JFK, MLK, and RFK were assassinated
- when a loved one dies (i.e., Pate, Mama Dotte, and Judie)
- when the life of Billy and Debbie’s son tragically ended
- reading that 100 million have been killed in wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- reuniting with tens of old colleagues through e-mail dialogue

*Yes, I have received Christ into my heart in big ways and small, when I was willing and when I wasn't, consciously and unconsciously, when I was a child and when I became a man. The event of Christ happens as it will: knocking at the door of my heart as benign revelation, crashing in, or gently blowing the door open with tender mercy. Whether I say "I accept Christ into my heart" or not is not all-important. What is all-important is that I know that every time my heart is opened, it is by the event of Christ. The meaning of the Incarnation is not God's coming into our realm, but God's coming into our hearts. That's what we celebrate at Christmas, the fact that the power of God has come to us, that the power of Christ has awakened us again, that the power of the Spirit will come into our hearts one way or another eternally.*

*The real Yes is acknowledging one's open heart, bowing to that power that opens it, and saying, "Welcome! Come in!"*

*Reflect this Christmas on how your heart has been mysteriously opened. Make your list and give thanks. Then sing to yourself those four lines of the carol, beginning, "How silently, how silently," and ending "the dear Christ enters in."*

*A heartfelt Christmas to all!*

*John*

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *The Transparent Event*, pp. 214-17.

**Reflection**

1. I list books, movies, global facts that have encountered me  
books                      movies                      facts

2. I list ten life events that have changed me:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

3. I put a “J” beside the most joyful.

4. I put a “P” beside the most painful.

5. I check the three that most “opened my heart.”

6. I underline the three key events.

7. I write three sentences to explain how the three events have been “key” to my life:

- 
- 
- 

8. From this meditation/reflection I have learned

9. I have learned that the *great event*

## 17 *The Prince of Darkness*

*One evening last week, as we were coming out of a friend's house into the dark, a good sized tree limb blind-sided me and brought blood. I have a nice scab on my forehead as I write. The next day I took my grandson Nolan's virus, and has it been a whopper: aching joints, pounding head, and swollen throat. Dragging through the apartment with the fever at night, I bumped into a chair and broke my toe. I went to the emergency room this morning because my little toe on my right foot had turned an indigo blue and was pointing to right field. I sat in the city hospital from 5:45 a.m. till 8:30, feverish, aching, disgusted with the bureaucratic mess, and sitting waiting on the doctor for most of an hour.*

*On the way out of the emergency room and struggling up the steps to the parking lot, I guess I was the very presence of broken-downness, hobbling with my new toeless shoe on my right foot, carrying one shoe, wearing my eye patch, sweaty and unshaven, with messed-up hair, sporting a nice scab on my forehead, and muttering.*

*An old black man coming down the walk looked me up and down and said, 'Ya know, suh, they can kill da body but not da spirit, less you let 'um.'*

*That stopped me. I looked around but he was gone. I quit muttering, got in the car, drove home with his words ringing loud in my being. On the way, Luther spoke: 'the body they may kill.' 'One little word shall fell' the Prince of Darkness when he's standing on your neck and in charge of your consciousness.*

*The old black man said that 'one little word' to me today. Then, with word in hand, I rose and beat up on the Prince of Darkness and decided I would do it again tomorrow.*

**WHO IS THIS PRINCE OF DARKNESS FOR US TODAY**, when we do not believe in mythological creatures? Besides being the oppressive captor of our consciousness, it is the deceiver who has us chasing

illusions every which way, that keeps us under the master illusion that our situation, as it is, is never quite what it should be and is usually unworthy of thanksgiving. The Prince of Darkness today keeps us under foot with cynicism, despair, and hopelessness. In short, it takes the spirit out of us.

Likewise, the Prince of Darkness clouds our vision. We settle for the established order of things in most areas of our living, thinking that life is basically *me-centered* and *human-centered*. We believe and operate out of all the old myths that the human is the quintessence of being, the only one who has been given dominion, the only one who is created in the image of *God*.

It takes a powerful revelation to call these illusions and myths into question. Yet we have such a revelation: in this post-modern era, *human progress* in science, technology, economy, governance, peacemaking, and care has proved itself to most humans as grossly inadequate. Over 100 million have been killed in wars of the 20th century; last year the 225 richest individuals on the planet had wealth equal to 2.5 billion of the poorest individuals; we spend more money for military defense than for education and health care; and we continue to rape the planet's resources.

Still, if such overwhelming truth does not release us from the oppression of the Prince of Darkness, new possibility breaks into our consciousness in other ways. The experience of being caught in gridlock on the Atlanta or L.A. "freeway" can be the occasion for "Enough of this madness!" Maybe it's seeing our favorite old trees struck down by a mercenary developer who paves over where they stood and builds another freestanding consumer box. Or it could be watching a documentary on the demise of another species. Or being struck by the simple power of Mother Teresa with only two sets of clothes. Or seeing the movie *Erin Brockovich*, witnessing what one woman did against all odds. Or hearing about a new model for village economy in Bangladesh, under the primary force of poor villagers.

The *word* of authentic possibility keeps coming to free us and empower us to fight against the Prince of Darkness, whose "rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure."

But the *word* isn't "abracadabra."



***Reflection***

1. Some examples of our illusions about the way life should be are
  
2. I saw an example of cynicism lately when
  
3. I saw an example of despair or hopelessness lately when
  
4. I knew the spirit had gone out of me when
  
5. How I know our vision has been clouded is
  
6. I tremble before the Prince of Darkness when I realize that we
  
7. I was freed from its power one time when
  
8. One way that I guard against the Prince of Darkness is

## 18 *The Mystery of a Child*<sup>1</sup>

*The presence of the Messiah is a mystery. . . . There is something surprising, unexpected about the appearance of salvation, something which contradicts pious opinions and intellectual demands. The mystery of salvation is the mystery of a child. . . . A child is real and not yet real, it is in history and not yet historical. Its nature is visible and invisible, it is here and not yet here. And just this is the character of salvation. Salvation has the nature of a child. . . . Only he who can see power in weakness, the whole in the fragment, victory in defeat, glory in suffering, innocence in guilt, sanctity in the sinner, life in death can say (with Simeon): Mine eyes have seen thy salvation.*

—Paul Tillich (*The New Being*, p. 95).

GRANDBABY KAITLYN HAS MESMERIZED US since her birth on November 14, almost a month ago now. We see the miracle of her through son Jeremiah's countenance and announcement—"It's a girl!"—as he carried her out of the delivery room. She is brand spanking new, filling us with wonder and awe. She comes ready or not, forcing us to respond to her in all her utter vulnerability with our fumbling care. She tries to see us who are loving her, but accepts our love blindly.

She does nothing useful; no one asks her what she does for a living. She knows almost nothing; no one judges her for her lack of education. She is sheer being, just there to be cared for and loved. The miracle is that her "job" of just being transforms those around her: relatives that were alienated are reconciled; strangers become friends; great grandparents are rejuvenated; grumps show compassion; judges show mercy.

Where did she learn to do all this? She has mysterious power. She must be a bit of being itself—like all *God's* children—bringing with her a bit of the new creation, a bit of the new reality.

*The mystery of the messiah comes  
into our world anew in the birth of a baby,  
whoever it belongs to,  
whatever gender, nationality, color, or religion.*

*It comes to us who think we do not want it or need it.  
It comes to us hardened cynics who have given up  
on new life ever happening to us again.  
It comes to us who think we have learned to live with  
separation and have given up on reunion.  
It comes to us who have shunned religion,  
yet, it rattles us with deep religious rumblings.  
It comes to us who are following every wise man and every  
star, looking for that which we will never find  
and which was never promised.*

*The mystery of the messiah comes as it wills,  
where it wills,  
when it wills.  
Sometimes it wills to come in the form of a child.*

*The Messiah has come.  
Be ready or not for its coming again.*

<sup>1</sup>From my *Christmas Letter* of 1995. Poem, this page, also in my first two books.

***Reflection***

1. Which line of Tillich caught my attention?
2. I underline the lines of the poem that caught my attention.
3. Which line really speaks to me?
4. What scenes of my life did I recall?
5. What is my mood, my feelings, as I reflect?
6. This poem says to me that
7. This poem is really about
8. My title for the poem is
9. This conversation motivates me to

## 19 *Changed Lives*

*Encounter is that event in which the self is confronted by the necessity for decision, the necessity for a decision which will affect one's self-understanding. For self-understanding is achieved, lost, modified or developed by the decisions which are forced upon one by those encounters. . . . To use our own terms, these encounters can be brutal—Auschwitz, the assassinations in America—or they can be gentle—love of a mother, the making of a friend. They can be from the past—the challenge of the self-understanding revealed in the teaching of Jesus or the deeds and words of Abraham Lincoln—or they can come from the future—the necessity of providing for retirement or of facing loneliness after the loss of a loved one. The one thing they all have in common is that necessity for decision which will further shape that self-understanding which makes a man what he is.*

—Norman Perrin (*The Promise of Bultmann*, p. 29)

IN THE MOVIE aptly named *As Good As It Gets*, we witness event after event in the lives of three people who are like us in many ways.

The events come in the command to keep an unwanted dog; in the wiped-out and mercied-back-to-life Simon; in the bizarre way that Carol's son is cured and she becomes a self-pitier. Sometimes the event is a word ("You will keep this dog!!"), sometimes a hug (Carol and Simon holding each other), and sometimes an apologetic deed (Melvin's sending the doctor to see Spence). Together there are blows, abusive words, tender strokes, necessary deeds, and volcanic affirmations. Either through smashing the old or gently beckoning the new, resurrection happens in the lives of Melvin, Simon, and Carol in their real life situations.

Is this a religious movie? Do people face up to reality as events happen? Are they reunited to others, themselves, and to the Ground of Being? Are lives changed, new life decisions made? Do they begin to care for each other authentically? If so, how would we begin to talk about where we see the *great event* happening in the movie? *Redemption*

*Runs Through It* is my second choice of a name for the film. Anytime lives are creatively transformed, the *great event* is there, whether in a great movie or in any old situation.

As the beginning quote says, “Self-understanding is achieved, lost, modified or developed by the decisions which are forced upon one by those [life] encounters.” The transformative event has always been happening in the lives of human beings in this world. The event is not the possession of religions but is the possession of the Spirit, blowing anywhere and any way it wills. And it never stops blowing. Its mission: to blow possibility for new life. The *great event* is an encounter that changes lives and makes them whole in spite of their brokenness, “while they were yet sinners,” as the Christian tradition says.

The Spirit blows through and changes most everybody’s life in the movie *As Good As It Gets*. But not magically or automatically. Again, the beginning quote: “Encounter is that event in which the self is confronted by the necessity for decision, the necessity for a decision which will affect one’s self-understanding [understanding of life].” The three characters grip our emotions as they struggle to decide to give in to the possibility of a new way of life or not. At first they don’t, but the Spirit keeps encountering them with the possibility of life-changing decisions. Maybe the main character in the movie is the Spirit.

It’s a movie about the *great event*, where Spirit encounters and confronts Melvin, Simon, and Carol with the decisions of their lives. What these characters find out is that life is good, right here, right now, with the relationships they have, and with the selves that they are. They discover the secret that life is as good as it gets. And whether they can articulate it or not, they sense the reason why: life is good because Spirit is always already present—and most active in their lives.

It’s got to be a religious movie. Check it out. If you’ve already seen it, see it again. It will make you laugh, cry, and reflect on the good life that you have.

***Reflection***

1. I name a “gentle” encounter (i.e., a loving act from a loved one or friend) that called forth a new decision from me.

2. I name a “challenge from the past” (i.e., “revealed in the teaching of Jesus or the deeds and words of Abraham Lincoln”) that called forth a new decision from me.

3. I name a “challenge from the future” (i.e., “the necessity of providing for retirement or of facing loneliness after the loss of a loved one”) that calls forth a new decision from me now.

4. I name a “brutal” encounter (i.e., “Auschwitz, the assassinations in America”) that called forth a new decision from me.

5. Do I agree that one’s self-understanding “is achieved, lost, modified or developed by the decisions which are forced upon one by [such] encounters”? Why or why not?

6. If in fact the encounters in *As Good As It Gets*, and our encounters named above, occasioned new decisions and changed lives, my conclusion is

## 20 *The Day My President Was Shot*

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o' rethrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

—from sonnet by John Donne

IN NOVEMBER 1963, I was working on a doctorate in English. One of my professors had assigned us to do a complete bibliography of the hundreds of pieces that Robert Browning had written. If one was omitted, failure. What a chore for undisciplined students. That day I was sitting in the huge university library trying to crank out another piece of the assignment when I heard a commotion at the front area of the library, so loud that those of us in study carrels came out to see what was going on.

The unholy noise in the library was the news of the assassination attempt on the life of President John F. Kennedy. Nobody wanted to talk about it or hold eye contact. I don't remember whether I packed my books or not, but I somehow got home without being run over. I was honest-to-God stupefied. What the hell was going on in our nation? I began to seethe. President Kennedy had become a symbol of hope and integrity for me. He inspired me. And now, *O God*, he lay dying. The awful tragedy shook my foundations.

Lynda heard it on the public address system at school where she was teaching. By the time she got home from school, about a thirty-minute drive, he was dead. We sort of propped each other up after she came into the apartment. And the long day's journey into night began. I wanted to hit something with all my might. I wanted to forget what I knew. I wanted to scream at something in charge of this absurd universe.

And later the nation and I began to watch TV together, for days. I mourned and cried and breathed hard and walked in and out of the apartment and prayed and tried to make sense of life and my life. I picked up the little book *Our Faith*, by Emil Brunner, that had made



sense to me before. He wrote it for me at this time, calling me to faith in that power that is absolutely not this earthly madness, but has called *me* to do something about it. “Lynda, studying Old English and doing that bibliography on Browning makes no sense. I am going to call Bishop Hunt and ask him what I should do.” He asked me if I felt called to the ministry again, since I had “lost” my calling at college when he was president there. His question/answer seemed to click. He said he would phone the seminary and see if they would receive me, starting the next semester. They would indeed.

I called home to share all this with the folks. Mama was still not home from work, so I spilled it all out to Dad, and added what I hoped would be authority enough for him, that Bishop Hunt thought I had been “called,” and he had helped get me into seminary. Dad retorted, “You’re a fool!” I remember well his words said over thirty-five years ago. Dad always spoke his mind. He saw that I was giving up a very secure scholarship and a very prestigious teaching career for a vagabond ministry where preachers moved every few years and made small salaries.

A couple of days later I told the head of the department that I was leaving the university to enroll in seminary. He cursed me, for his department would lose its three-year matching NDEA grant money. I was receiving mixed signals about my calling.

That event, set off by that bullet—by whomever—turned me inside out and changed my life forever. I learned the dynamics of what was happening to me later:

- An external event happens (the assassination) . . .
- which occasions an interior crisis (despair over USA) . . .
- which sometimes opens us up to the reality of the way life is (the meaning of life is to give myself for what I see is called for) . . .
- which leaves us with the possibility to elect or reject human existence as it is given (I could make a new decision and do whatever necessary to fulfill that demand).

This battering event of the Mysterious Power comes to all of us. It leads to crisis, to truth, to new decision, and new life. It is so real we can hardly stand its power. We call upon religious metaphor

to describe the terrible, awe-full experience that causes us to tremble and yet brings new life. Why is birth so excruciating?

Donne writes: "Batter my heart / to o'rethrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new." But even more, the *great event* births in me *new life* "That I may rise, and stand."

### ***Reflection***

1. Life-changing events have been happening in human history since
2. Names given to this type of event
3. I prefer to call it
4. People that I know who have experienced such a life-changing event
5. Such an event happened to me when
6. How was I affected?
7. Looking back, what difference did it make in my life?

## 21 *Christ the Event*

I AM A CHRISTIAN because of Christ the event.

During the other six meditations under the dynamic of *Awakening*, I have recited many *events* that changed my life, i.e., walking out of the hospital, the birth of a grandchild, the death of JFK, and a list of events in my Christmas letter; and beyond my life to changed lives in general, as dramatized in the movies, in the lives of the three main characters in *As Good as it Gets*, and in E. E. Cummings' poem about the brush with death.

Out of these life examples I can now talk about the *Christ event*. I am using the method of observing what is going on in life and then naming it, like in the beginning of the Christian movement. They saw peoples' lives changed and named it the Christ-event-experience, which was the beginning of the Christian tradition. Changed lives preceded the story and the later elaborate doctrine, which were only trying to articulate the profundity of the life-changing Christ event. The early church hardly started out with a doctrine of *God* being incarnate in Jesus and asking people to believe that doctrine in order to be changed. The Christian tradition, its story, and its theology grew out of what was happening in life, in changed lives.

Therefore, I am *not* talking about something that is reserved for Christian believers. The revolution that came with the *Jesus-the-Christ-event* was and is a revolution in consciousness, the way the Spirit in life acts upon our lives to change them and make them full.

It is in human consciousness that divinity is born. Something is not the Christ, the Messiah, nor the Divine for me until I experience it as divine. Or it is not divine until I believe it and act out of it—in faith—as ultimate truth for me. Jesus was not divine as a baby in a manger, for a divinely conceived baby born of a virgin makes no sense to me as a 21<sup>st</sup> century human, though I believe the Christ story.

Some called Jesus' cross the deed of *God*—interpreting it through their experience of new life—as a symbol of new life: resurrection now.

To them *Christ the event* happened through the visible presence of *Jesus the man*, and they therefore said he reveals the invisible grace of *God*. Was *Jesus God's* sacrament in human existence? I say *Yes* after the fact of my many experiences of *Christ the event*.

The *Christ event* is an event that happens to all humans—at least—and only in this life, as far as I know, through encounters in this world. *Christ events* are life encounters that bring me to the truth about life and my life. They bring me to understand the way life is, has been, and ever will be, in such a way that I can decide to have my life in thankfulness, or throw it away as an ingrate. If so, I decide life is not good as it is, but bad, wrong, fated, or hopeless. The *Christ event* comes to every soul with the decision for or against life as it is at that moment. Some receive this *great event* with open eyes and joyous hearts and say “*Yes*,” but more reject this grace-filled happening and shut out the transformative truth of that profound moment.

*Jesus the man* (Meditation 25) was born about 4 C.E. and was crucified about 37 C.E. *Christ the event* was born “in the beginning,” even before the dawn of consciousness, and lives eternally in every person’s life experience as the event of grace and truth, rejected or said “*Yes*” to.

How have I come to this Christ understanding? Through the Christ tradition, of course. But before this grace event was religious it was secular, meaning it was going on in human consciousness from the beginning. I’ve been interpreting this secular event through my religious story of the Christ transformation. The secular story is very simple: *Something happened and my life was changed*. Yet, I submit that this simple, secular story of conversion has come into human tradition—in great part—through my Christ tradition and the religious traditions of others. The life-changing event has always been at the heart of being human and religions have arisen to make sense of such depth events in our lives.

All of which is to say, *Christ the event* is the story of what has been and is going on in my life, and therefore I am *Christian*.

**Reflection**

1. *Jesus the human* is different from *Christ the event*. Yes or No?
2. I believe *Jesus the human* was a historical reality. Yes or No?
3. I believe *Christ the event* is a historical reality. Yes or No?
4. What are words or phrases in the meditation that mean the same as the *Christ event* (e.g., “profound moment”)?
5. I name examples of a *Christ event* in the Bible (e.g., Paul on the road to Damascus).
6. What were the results?
7. I name examples of a *Christ event* in literature or the movies.
8. I give an example of a *transformative event* in my life.
9. What has been the result?

## 22 *The Contentless Word*

I SENSE THE NECESSITY to articulate the word about the meaning of life in such a way that every person of every faith can say, “Aha, this is the way life is for me,” and again be released to have faith in that mysterious power we call *God*.

John Knox in “The Event and the Story” talks about the dimensions of the Christian story as ontological, historical, and mythological. He says that if the historical is left out of that story, *gnosticism* results, which is ungrounded mysticism; if the mythological dimension is left out of the story, *fundamentalism* results, which is literalizing other-worldly myths; and if the ontological is left out, *modernism* results, which is an objectively verifiable, this-worldly story that lacks mystery and depth of meaning.

He helps us to see our basic contradiction today: namely, our society does not put much stock in the ontological and mythological dimensions of life, leaving us with “what-you-see-is-what-you-get” historical meanings. We have ended up with a depressing realism, a shallow liberalism, and with an other-worldly fundamentalism that does not compute. Using Knox’s terms, life seems uneventful and our life stories are not motivating. We do not experience our experience as fulfilling. We interpret our lives as not worth much.

The needed direction is a new articulation of the life-giving word. Joseph Mathews wrote, “The Christ decision was transparently *an election for or against life itself*. The negative answer was at bottom a rejection of human existence as it is constituted” (“Christ of History,” p. 9).

A pivotal moment in my journey was studying *The Image* by Kenneth Boulding. In it, Boulding employs a non-religious style as he articulates the process of image transformation. What became clear for me was that behavior changes when one’s basic operating image is altered by a new message, and leaves one with the decision to accept or reject the message. Our resistance to a new message is strong. The “aha!” for me was a secular articulation of the life dynamics of *conversion*, an

analogy Boulding uses.

We in the Ecumenical Institute and the Order: Ecumenical said that when such a life-changing event happens to a person, the *contentless word* has been heard and said *Yes* to. A contemporary person does not have to go through the maze of other worlds and the unbelievable myths of religions to experience the life-changing event. Therefore, the *contentless word*, the word about life that is no special religious word, can be articulated many ways: for example, "Life is good." The major religions express content-full words, such as when it is reported that Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me" (Jn. 14:6). What rings most true for most people is not religiously content-full language but the content-less language about the truth and meaning of life.

We formulated *imaginal education*, which emphasizes holding up a strong alternative image with which a person's operating image can enter into dialogue. For example, if I articulate a strong image of Christ that does not fit with your operating image of Christ, then we have ourselves a strong dialogue over truth as we perceive and experience it in our real lives, not in some abstract discussion about religious texts. When the process works, new decisions emerge and consequently deeper freedom and worth are realized. We called imaginal education a *life method*, for it is true to the way life works, as best we can tell from our own life experiences.

The key to such methodologies is understanding the life dynamics of the *contentless word* that encounters us with the decision about the *election for or against life*: to embrace life as good or to reject it as bad; to embrace my life as good, the way it is, or reject it as bad; to embrace the past as approved or reject it as still held against us; to embrace the future as open or reject it as closed.

Nothing is more fundamental to life than this *contentless word* of possibility that gives us our full freedom to decide that life, our lives, the past, and the future are good or bad. This *contentless word* confronts us with the great *Yea* or *Nay* of our existence, which makes all the difference in how we live our lives.

And where does this *contentless word* come from? The same place that any word of Spirit and truth comes from.

***Reflection***

1. An example of the *historical* dimension of life is (i.e., the past)
2. An example of the *ontological* (being) dimension of life is (i.e., depth)
3. An example of the *mythological* dimension of life is (i.e., angels)
4. Mathews' phrase, "an election for or against life itself," is a secular or religious statement.
  
5. The last time I deeply gave thanks for (elected) life was
  
6. The last time I really hated (rejected) life was
  
7. Where do religious words come from?
8. Where does the *contentless word* come from?
9. Religious words that make sense to me are
  
10. The *contentless word* (the truth about life) for me these days is



## 23 *Vocation as Seen in the Movies*

I WAS INSPIRED by the movies *Erin Brockovich* and *Cider House Rules*. Just goes to show you that Hollywood does know what authentic vocation is, despite the dysfunctional *American Beauty*.

Erin Brockovich responded to something beyond herself, made the sacrifices necessary, and left us with hope, for she was battling a seemingly impossible situation—divorced twice, three children, the last one less than a year-old, no job, no credentials, a crashed car, the utilities being turned off, and no friend or relative in sight. But her job as legal assistant became her vocation. She and her firm brought the large southwestern utility to its knees on behalf of over six hundred claimants whose health had been tragically damaged by the utility company's irresponsible run off of highly toxic chromium into the area water system.

In *Cider House Rules*, Dr. Larch is a vocated doctor and prepares his orphan understudy, Homer Wells, for a vocation of service as well. There are many sub-themes of morality in the movie, but the major moral issue is authentic vocation, for morality has more to do with exemplary human service than it does with a list of our virtues.

What then is vocation? Thomas Cahill says the Jews gave humanity its concept of vocation, of being called to a task worth one's life, of being called to live on behalf of something beyond oneself, of being called by the *Spirit* at the heart of creation.

My vocation is to be a bearer of good news. Through the medium of writing I yearn to be a *post-modern evangelist*. Sounds like pious jargon to many, I'm sure. I mean something like this: I want to help as many as possible to see the meaning in life and to decide to embrace it—to live life fully. I want people to understand that the *life within* is more real than material stuff, and more real than supernatural notions. I want people to understand that existence is graced, and therefore precious, and that their living life in self-conscious thanksgiving and universal dedication is the meaning of their living.

On National Public Radio I heard the blues singer Shemekia

Copeland tell what her daddy, blues singer Johnny Clyde Copeland, told her: “Nobody wants to listen to somebody sing just to make money. You’ve gotta sing because you need to. If you have the blues inside you, you’ll have to let ‘um go. Your soul will die if you don’t.” Likewise for me: only evangelize if you need to, have to, only if you have the *word* inside you and you have to let it out. Your soul will die if you don’t. That is being called. It is not just a job, not even a career. It is vocation. Vocation is complicity with the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the Spirit questions of our time are

*Can we get along and come together?*

*Can we sustain a home in the universe for all?*

*Can we bless the planet rather than just use it?*

*Can we help humanity grasp its vocation, its **great work**?*

These are questions that are begging for our vocational response. These are questions worth our lives. These are the questions I hope and pray Hollywood and the movies internationally will depict. The box office take for *Erin Brockovich* and *Cider House Rules* wasn’t bad, but they needed to be shown even if they lost money. It’s a matter of vocational integrity among the industry.

<sup>1</sup>This and the paragraph above come from my book *Called to Be*, p. 295.

***Reflection***

1. I underline assumptions of vocation in this meditation.
2. Therefore, the author's definition of vocation goes something like
  
3. I would add to or change his definition this way:
  
  
4. I have/have not experienced vocation.
  
5. I have/have not resisted a vocational call.
  
6. The situations "begging for my vocational response" at this time are
  
  
7. I describe my vocation in a short paragraph.

## 24 *Gracious Freedom*

BECAUSE of the gracious events  
in life  
and in my life

### *I am freed FROM*

having to be saved  
*from* the fear of failure  
*from* the fear of death  
*from* having to believe anything special  
*from* finding meaning in anything I do  
*from* finding meaning in any relationship  
*from* having to go searching for love  
*from* trying to be loveable  
*from* having to do anything at all  
*from* having to know anything at all  
*from* having to be anything at all  
*from* securing my future  
*from* having to win  
*from* justifying my past  
*from* fulfilling my calling  
*from* worrying about what others think of me  
*from* guilt  
*from* anxiety  
*from* sin  
*from* having to be right  
*from* having to be righteous  
*from* being responsible to the world  
*from* having to be myself (whatever that means)  
*from* trying to get to heaven

I am even *freed from* having to be free.



**Reflection**

1. I underline the lines that caught my attention.
2. My mood after reading this poem is
3. I list other phrases of what I am free *from*
  - 
  - 
  -
4. I list other phrases of what I am free *for*
  - 
  - 
  -
5. When was I most scared in the exercise of my freedom?
6. When was I most thankful for my freedom?
7. I list ways of how I could lose my freedom
  - 
  - 
  -
8. With a gun at my head I am still free. How so/how not so?
9. More than anything else, freedom has to do with
10. *Freedom* is

## 25 *Jesus the Man*

AS I REFLECT on *Jesus the man*, I am put off by the traditional myth of Jesus that says he was *God's* only Son, divine upon arrival. This is a major reason Jesus is not taken seriously today: he is seen as a mythical creature. But we can relate to Jesus who is like us in every way (Heb. 4:15) as the creeds later say, stressing his humanity. Sadly, though, his humanity has always come in second to his divinity.

With Jesus as the mythic creature—which is not at all what I mean by *the Christ*—we exchange faith for magic. His virgin birth, his descent into hell, his ascent into heaven, his coming back on a cloud at the last, his many miracles, his walking on water, his replacing ears, his bodily resurrection, his walking through doors after his resurrection—these are the stuff of myth that I can only appreciate as story and symbol. Therefore, it is quite helpful to me to hear the Jesus scholars' historical accounts of Jesus without the myths, both in narrative and in the drastically reduced red letters (text in the New Testament attributed to the words of Jesus).

If his experience of life was not like ours, identifying with his him is out of the question. We cannot be his followers. We will just wait to be saved or throw baby Jesus out with the bath water of supernatural notions, like too many of our contemporaries have.

Yet it is a hard saying to say we are like Jesus. First, we are scandalized to speak of Jesus with 100 percent *human freedom*, even to the point of his free sacrifice, which means he didn't have to do it. Why else the sweating blood in Gethsemane? He agonized, like us, in deciding to go or not to go to Jerusalem, to do or not to do his Father's will. Lest he had free human choice, he does not get under our skin. The supernatural Jesus is no threat to us, for he is not free; he simply makes us dependent on miracles and magic. But the humanly free Jesus confronts us with a decision to go and do likewise. His Father chose him just like that same *One* chooses us today. The address upon us, therefore, is that Jesus freely chose to be the one, with all the passion of his human

being. He was not a deity masquerading as a man.

Second, the scandal of Jesus is his 100 percent *human faith*. At the core of Jesus' understanding and way of life is an undeniable reality: his faithfulness to *God* and neighbor.

I can begin to understand it when Jesus said to have faith in *God* as he did, to follow him in struggling to be obedient to his Father's will, to follow him in loving one's enemies, to follow him in deciding my mission and even my mode of death, to follow him in giving my life for what I understand to be the cause of *God*. These are the marks of Jesus' human faith. They depict *Jesus the man* obsessed with the grace, love, and the mission of *God*—with the Kingdom. Still, I can identify with his obsessive faithfulness to God and to *God's* creation.

So, I am deeply confronted by Jesus when he says follow me, for I am like him. We both are human. If he can, I can. If I am free like him, I can have faith like him. That's why *Jesus the man* is so offensive to us humans, maybe even why we humans put him to death. Jesus has made our lives supremely difficult by showing us the human way of freedom and faith.

But our walk will also be easier because Jesus has gone before. *Jesus the man* did walk this lonesome valley, and he did have to walk it by himself—as a non-mythic being. Like you and me, nobody else could walk it for him. He understood and interpreted his walk as the meaning of his life: to serve his Father and his Father's creation. His message by word and deed about his walk and our walk brings it all together. We understand the walk now. We understand the meaning of our lives. Therefore, Jesus is the first of many brothers and sisters. We have already seen more than enough to freely choose to have faith in the One he called *Father*, and thus to live the life of Jesus, which is hardly the life of Riley.

The ongoing debate in Christendom is hot as we enter the new millennium, whether our criterion for faith is *Jesus the man*—as best we can know about him after twenty centuries—or the Christ of faith, *Christ the event* (Meditation 21)—as best we can understand the transforming power of the *word* that the New Testament and the Christian tradition witness to. Both *Jesus the man* and *Christ the event* are all-determining facts of the human journey of every person.



**Reflection**

1. I first heard about Jesus when
2. My picture of the physical Jesus is
3. I agree with the scholars that he lived from about the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 37<sup>th</sup> year of the first millennium of the Common Era, or 4-37 A.D.
4. I agree/disagree that this Jew, through the Christian religion, has profoundly changed history.
5. I can/cannot identify with Jesus as a human being.
6. I believe Jesus was (I check only the one that best says it for me.)
  - a prophet
  - a sage
  - a religious revolutionary
  - a holy man
  - the Son of *God*, the Messiah
  - the fulfillment of what it means to be human
  - the transparency to *God*
  - *God's* show and tell
  - the free and faithful one
7. My biggest struggle with *Jesus* is
8. The real question for me is

## 26 *Two Good Words . . . Sometimes*

IN MATTERS OF FAITH, two words have been defamed in my time and place, *atheist* and *heretic*. Growing up in the heart of traditional, if not fundamentalist, Christianity, I did not want to be ostracized from the greater community by being referred to as a heretic or an atheist. Being labeled either was the same as being un-American, for polls show that over 90 percent of Americans believe in “God.”

Believing in “God,” my culture thought, was the opposite of being a heretic or an atheist. Now, I consider myself both, but the strange thing is, I believe more deeply in *God* than I did while growing up. So what is going on here? Have the definitions changed, or has cultural religion’s idea of “God” been exposed? I think the latter.

Early Christians were considered *atheists* in Rome, for example, because they did not believe in the pagan gods of the Roman Empire. They were therefore dangerous to the State and were often torn apart by wild animals at sporting affairs that drew sell-out crowds of true-believing Romans. What I can take from this is that an *atheist* can be one who does not believe in the controlling culture’s god.

I would have been an *atheist* in Germany, for Nazism pronounced that “God” hates Jews, other minorities, and homosexuals. And at the risk of my life, for even though Hitler said the Fatherland was the ultimate good, we now know it was saluting the Fuhrer, and what he stood for, that was the determining criterion of that culturally correct faith.

*Am I an atheist today in America if I do not believe . . .*

- that “God’s” chosen people are white, American Christians?
- that “God” will wipe out the infidels soon in the great cataclysm?
- that “God” loves African-Americans and Hispanics less than whites?
- that “God” loves the religious right more than the liberal left?
- that “God” wills that we wipe out those who do not believe in pro-life?
- that “God” hates the homosexual?
- that “God” has little use for those on welfare?
- that “God” really meant that those of European descent, rich, and educated, would inherit the kingdom?

If this is the litany of what it means to believe in “God,” then I am an avowed atheist *now*, like I hope I would have been *then* in Germany. I will not bow my knee to any such gods of division. Such a god is a false god, not the *God* Jesus worshipped, obeyed, and proclaimed. Let us get the Christian *God* straight and denounce false American gods. The question is, How many believe in Jesus’ *God*? Not anywhere close to 90 percent, by the undeniable truth of hate-filled beliefs and actions listed above.

*Heretic* is also a good word when one considers its original meaning: to pick and choose what one believes. If I cannot believe all that the established religious culture says I am to believe, then I am considered a heretic. So be it, for who can believe all he is supposed to believe? I can only believe what I can honestly believe.

*Am I a heretic if I cannot believe . . .*

- that “God” created all in six days?
- that “God” was vengeful, i.e., killing the enemies of Israel?
- that Jesus was born of a virgin?
- that “God” ordains that women be lesser than men?
- that “God” will bodily raise Jesus’ followers?
- that “God” loves the Hindu, Moslem, and Buddhist less than the Christian?
- that “God” will only “save” those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord?

If this is the litany of what it means to believe in “God,” then I am an avowed heretic. How can I believe what I can’t believe and what Jesus did not ask me to believe in order to be his true follower in faithfulness toward *God*? The question is How many believe in Jesus’ *God*? Not How many believe literally in this or that piece of Scripture that the tradition wrote and says we must believe?

A *Godly* atheist denies the hate-filled and divisive gods of his/her culture. A *Godly* heretic denies the literal beliefs of her/his religious culture if they make no sense in light of the teachings and faith of Jesus. It would be better to be an atheist or heretic and to be true to Jesus’ *God*, I believe.

**Reflection**

1. I would/would not have been an atheist in the Roman Empire?
2. I would/would not have been an atheist in Nazi Germany?
3. I am/am not a heretic in fundamentalist America?
4. True/false, *atheist* and *heretic* are always in some resistant relationship with an established culture of beliefs.
5. I am/am not a true believer.
6. What are some beliefs of our established culture that I cannot believe?
  - 
  - 
  -
7. What are some beliefs of our established religious culture that I cannot believe?
  - 
  - 
  -
8. How does it make me feel to be in/out with established beliefs?
9. What are basic religious beliefs that I will not let go?
  - 
  - 
  -
10. Why not?

## 27 *What Do You Believe?*

*Thy light in our eyes;  
Thy word in our ears;  
Thy love in our hearts;  
Thy world in our hands.*

—prayer of illumination

I CHATTED WITH A COLLEAGUE LATELY by e-mail who told me what he believes “down deep inside”:

*I bump into that ‘mysterious power’ everyday and it still raises the questions of Who I am? What do I? and that usually omitted question How be I? In fact, that is the source of my living and my faith, even my very existence.*

*I get my illusions shattered on a daily basis and embrace the word of my acceptance issuing in a die-born story to live by.*

*I am a free-to-be-lucid human being, free to think any thought, do any deed, be any style of life as long as I’m loving and following the source out of which I came.*

*And I’m called to give my life on behalf of all civilization, laying it down of my own free will—constantly asking myself if the human structure I’m giving my life on behalf of comes to see and find a healthy relationship to the Mystery of life.*

He inspired me by the way he witnessed to the truth. I e-mailed him back and articulated what I believe:

*My care drives me every which way, but my search for success, love, and meaning is not to be fulfilled. In fact, these lesser gods are held hostage by that which is finally in charge. I am left with the questions of what to call this ultimate power and what is my relationship to it.*

*These questions do not happen in abstraction, but in real*

*encounters where the truth about my life is revealed to me—broken and never to be put back together again in any way that I dream of. Sometimes when I experience my brokenness most painfully, I hear and believe that my life is good as created, I hear and believe that I am one with all that is and even with myself.*

*Out of these life-changing happenings I sense myself a dead man walking, with no thing to gain and no thing to lose. I know myself free to live my life as only I decide. How other free humans have lived their lives leaves me with awful possibility.*

*I hear a call to come and join the community of those over the centuries who have given themselves—quite literally—for the new spirit mode and new social vehicle needed in every age. This “community of saints” beckons me to be the authentic deed in service to that ultimate power at the heart of life.*

My colleague and I are close together in our basic beliefs, but I knew that already. What got clear to me again during this dialogue was the power of sharing in a few paragraphs what it is I believe. He is a thoroughgoing secular-religious type, so the dialogue was cast in secular poetry that points to metaphors of depth.

Another time I put in a few sentences what I believed about the *great event* and shared that with a seminary interested in my services. One member of the committee asked, “What is your Christology?” I answered,

*I believe in the transparent event, which means I see the ultimate meaning of life through Jesus (Jesus is my best window onto God), number one; and, number two, through the revelatory event of grace I am given to accept my acceptance (faith decision) and am at one with that mysterious power I call God, at one with others, and even at one with myself. Such events transform my life.*

*Further, that revelation proclaims: in spite of all the suffering, crises, and tragedies, **life is good** just as it is; in spite of your neuroses, faults, and doubts, **you are received**; in spite of all the atrocities, failures, and guilt, **the past is approved**; in spite of all the ambiguities, fear, and overwhelmedness, **all is possible**.*

A more religious audience this time, so a more religious witness in the first half. As St. Paul says, witness to them in the language they can hear. The truth is the truth is the truth, in whatever language.

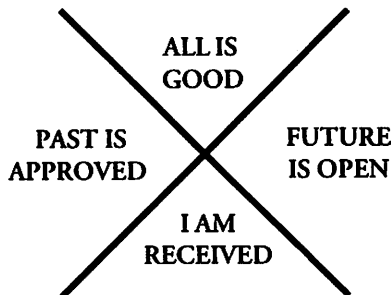
***Reflection***

1. Of the three “witnesses,” the one that speaks to me most is
2. In a few words, that is because
3. If I were to write what I believe in a couple of paragraphs, I would say something like this:

## 28 *The Word's In History*

**THE WORD'S IN HISTORY.** It eternally dwells among us. There is no other authority—finally—no scientific, economic, political, rational, historical, or religious authority to which we can appeal. The *good news* of *gracious existence* has already sounded, and the hallelujahs have been echoing from two millennia to fifteen billion years, or longer, depending on how we date the coming of the ultimate *word* into our realm. John's *Gospel* says the *word* was from the beginning. Any way we date it, the *word's* in history.

What is this historical *word* that is all I need to know to be a fulfilled human being? *First*, it is the fact that I, just as I am, am accepted, received, loved, forgiven. I am the prodigal son or daughter greeted home with open arms. *Second*, not just my life, but life in general, is no mistake—it is a gracious gift. I can give thanks for all that is, just as it is, knowing life is good. *Third*, this *word* proclaims that my past is stamped approved, that whatever happened or didn't happen back there on my journey has brought me to this moment—which is a very good moment, just created. If it took all that up-and-down journey to bring me here, then so be it and let me give thanks. *Finally*, my future, like my past, is good. It is perfectly open, waiting for me to pick it up and live. The *word* is the truth every morning, the truth of the open future that is the newly created day—let me rejoice and be glad in it. To sum up the *word*: My life is received. All is good. The past is approved. The future is open. Put together, it is the “X” *word*:





All this is *the word*. This *word* is not only written in the Book and lives of my tradition, but in the lives and hearts of those billions who have been encountered by this all-powerful *word* throughout all ages—even before and after Jesus—and all places—even where no missionary has gone. For this *word* is written on the wind of the Spirit, which is absolutely out of the control of any religion and absolutely dedicated to working its way into every cell of creation. This *word* is that without which we cannot live. It is the very bread and blood of life.

Now, if this *word* is in history, where does that leave me? It awaits my response every time it makes me conscious of its truth. The *word* is not magic, it demands my *Yes* before it becomes *the word* for me. The *word's* in history, but it may not be in my history.

When I let the *word* into the citadel of my life, it makes all the difference in the way I see, hear, feel, and think. It makes all the difference in how I respond to and touch creation,

from the baby found in the trash can  
to the unclean river  
to the poor  
to the dying species  
to the lonely  
the mournful  
the anachronistic religious structures  
the destitute  
the marginalized  
the ravaged rainforest  
the arrogant  
the politically corrupt  
the enslaved  
the dysfunctional family  
the depleting natural reserves  
the hungry children  
the dying dolphins  
the beleaguered welfare system  
the despairing  
the war torn  
the littered streets and alleys  
the outsider

the rich  
the victimized  
the uneven healthcare systems  
the homeless  
the global warming  
the latest famine  
the eroded land  
the wretched  
the greedy global corporations  
the insensitive  
the AIDS epidemic in Africa  
the dying AIDS patient down the street  
the growing water scarcity  
the land developer  
the encroaching desert  
the handicapped  
the righteous  
the polluted air  
the pious  
the violent prisoner  
the heavy laden  
the totalitarian regimes  
and the enemy.

If I have done it unto one of the least of these, I have heard and lived the *word*. And miraculously the *word* has been born again in history, this time through me.

***Reflection***

1. Which part of the “X” *word* speaks to me at this moment?
2. What is the *good news*?
3. Why is it *good news*?
4. I underline five of the long list that grab me.
5. Which of these five will I have the hardest time relating to?
6. What is my articulation of the *word* to the five of them?
7. What difference would such a *word* make in their circumstances?
8. What will it take for me to deliver the *word*?

## 29 *The Deed Goes On*

WHAT CHANGES HISTORY? The answer according to H. Richard Niebuhr is when someone “reduplicates the deed” of Jesus. First, one is seen to have done a radical deed, and then history says the deed is transparent to the deed of Jesus. Doubly radical. When we see the *Jesus deed* going on in the lives of those who came before or after him, we have no problem understanding the faithful-to-God and the on-behalf-of-neighbor style of life that changes history.

Look at Gandhi, Joan of Arc, Hammarskjöld, Mother Teresa, St. Francis, at the martyrs of the early church, Paul and Polycarp, for example. We can see and point—lo here, lo there, an expression of the wind. It is the deed of Abraham, Moses, Paul, Lord Buddha, Muhammad, Luther, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thomas Becket, John Wesley, John Woolman, Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Pope John XXIII, Elie Wiesel, Joseph Mathews, Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Gordon Cosby, Archbishop Romero, and on and on.

They have obviously reduplicated the *Jesus deed*. Like him, they were out to reconcile creation, at whatever cost. Witness the *God-awful* power that is manifest when history judges that one gave his or her life to do the will of the *One* who calls and sends. Lives are changed. History is changed.

The Jesus deed is the cornerstone of our self-understanding of the free deed—life-surrendering if need be—on behalf of all, out of the inspiration of the graciousness disclosed at the heart of being. Since Jesus’ deed is in the fabric of life, others also have had the new vision of creation, on behalf of whom they have lived and even died.

Jesus showed us that freedom is possible, that faith is possible, that being a vanguard of historical change is possible. He showed us that when these possibilities are embodied, transformation flares forth “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Some of the *marks* of those who have reduplicated the deed:

- called and vocated—usually through a triggering event
- radical faith in the *One* who calls and sends
- covenanted and assigned
- cares for his/her own spirit and therefore cares for neighbor
- obedient to no one and everyone
- no certainty, no security, and no reward—usually
- wills one thing—chaste
- absolutely free, therefore absolutely committed
- sees nothing as hopeless
- a simple life-style so can move where and when led—detached
- repents on behalf of, forgives, honors, and reconciles
- directed at the underlying contradiction which enslaves the most
- cruciform style similar to the sacrificial mode of the universe
- knows life is not to store up but to expend on behalf of

Such a one becomes a sign to others to go and do likewise, a basic mark of the *Jesus deed* and the unending replication process.

It all comes down to the two things major religions say above all else: love *God* and neighbor. Jesus' love for, faith in, and obedience to his Father is the foundation of his deed on behalf of the universe neighbor. Jesus gave us a new image of who the neighbor is and love for the neighbor. Being a good Jew, he said one cannot love *God* and hate the neighbor. The *Jesus deed* is the paradigm for loving the whole neighbor, all *God's* children—especially the untouchables—including the lilies of the field and the sparrows, his way of saying all creation.

Jesus' life was the call to live the great commandment of life: faithfulness to the *One* on behalf of *all*—the *great work*. Therefore for me, Jesus is a source for all humans and essential to our motivation for the *great work*.

And those who do the *Jesus deed* keep coming. As the hymn “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” says,

“ . . . There are hundreds of thousands still.  
The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will. . . .  
And there's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too.  
. . . And I mean to be one too.”

***Reflection***

1. I first saw a Jesus deed
2. I add others who have embodied the Jesus deed?
3. For me, the important parts of the Jesus deed are
  - 
  - 
  -
4. I experienced I was a part of a Jesus deed when I
5. Will the Jesus deed ever leave human consciousness? Why or why not?
6. What do the Gautama deed, the Abraham/Moses deed, the Muhammad deed have in common with the Jesus deed?
7. How do they all inform the *great work*?

## 30 *What Do You Do?*

SOON AFTER MY SECOND BOOK was published, I read a portion of it to Thomas Berry at his hermitage above the stable. In our conversation I asked him, “Thomas, what do you do when you are not writing?” He answered, “I write, (he paused and gave me that wry grin) and I don’t write.” As a writer, I too write and spend most of the rest of my time thinking about what I am called to write. This is what chastity means for a writer.

At Caswell Beach, North Carolina, last summer, I was sitting on the beach at dawn when a good-sized seagull, perched about twenty feet in front of me on the boardwalk, cawed at me. She glared at me eyeball to eyeball, as if to say, “What are you doing in my space?” I shivered the eerie shiver of being addressed by the other, that which is not “me,” and which *is* “me” in a strange way.

In the lingering eye contact with that other creature, I realized what Thomas has written, that we humans are the self-consciousness of the universe. Then maybe our job as writers and artists is to reflect upon what we sense—see, hear, smell, taste, feel—in creation. My job is to draw a picture, write about what I sense is the truth, to stand in the clearing of consciousness and to hold an internal dialogue with what in creation has encountered me. The notebook of the writer is the easel of his conscious perception. He is reflecting what catches his attention, for he is a sensor of the universe, an interpreter, a reflector.<sup>1</sup>

What does the seagull do? What is the turtle’s job down the beach as she crawls out of the ocean in the dark of the night to bury her eggs in the dunes? I don’t rightly know. They both mystify me. They are doing something for sure.

When we ask someone what s/he does, aren’t we really asking What do you think your role is in life? What is your purpose in being . . . here? Maybe we are showing due respect to the mystery of life and really asking Why do you think you are here? Just maybe our question of What do you do? is a question to the mystery in life, who veils our

reason for being here and therefore compels our life-questions.

At bottom, our life is our response to the mystery of being, at least to the mystery of our being . . . here. Where do you come from? Where are you going? are the pre-questions of What do you do? These are meaning-questions that everyone is called to answer. What is your interpretation of why you are here? What is your story, your life-scenario? Such interpretive questions belie the fact that we are only mobile mammal cadavers alive to scratch for survival.

In this context, let me ask again, What do you do? I sell clothes. I am a secretary. I am a housewife. I am a technician. These are not the real answers. They are the answers to another question, What is our occupation or job? But they are not what we do.

We do our lives. The *do* of our lives is far more than just doing something. Our lives are at least as much *knowing* and *being* as they are *doing*, but upon reflection we seem to hold all three in the question What do you do? The religions figured all this out and said the question is really What is your calling, your vocation? What have I been called to be? could be the profound question someone is asking when they ask What do you do?

Wow. Watch out for small talk. I asked a person recently What do you do? She answered, "I consume," and giggled. Scripture flashed in my mind, with a twist: "Father, bless her, for she knows not what she does." Is she fulfilling her role as the self-consciousness of the universe?

<sup>1</sup>This and the paragraph above is taken from my book *Called To Be*, p. 94.





## 31 *The Ecozoic Era*

*We need an inter-species economy, an inter-species well-being, an inter-species education, an inter-species governance, an inter-species religious mode, inter-species ethical norms.*

—Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme  
(*The Universe Story*, p.260)

WHAT IF Lee Smolin is right, that each black hole has or is birthing a universe? How many would there be? What if Andrei Linde is right, that universes are coming into being faster and faster, and therefore we must speak of the multiverse, or at least a “gargantuan universe”? Or what about the pre-big bang scenario (*The Elegant Universe*, pp. 345-370)? How many tens of billions years long is our history, really? These speculations boggle the imagination.

What we do know is that *creation* is a big enough word to hold the sum of it, that is if we understand creation as forever emerging and not something that happened in six days.

Shocking as the above questions are, they are not as shocking as What are the consequences of our not making the transition to the Ecozoic Era? In *The Universe Story*, Swimme and Berry say the “future will be worked out in the tensions between those committed to the Technozoic, a future of increased exploitation of Earth as resource, all for the benefit of humans, and those committed to the Ecozoic, a new mode of human-Earth relations, one where the well-being of the entire Earth community is the primary concern.”

So the question is How do we begin to step up to the **primary concern: the entire Earth community?**

The recently formed Center for Ecozoic Studies<sup>2</sup> is attempting to spread this consciousness through three strategies: a new story, bioregional priorities, and a new spirituality. “The new story needs to be told in myriad ways. It needs to be taught. It needs to be read in bedtime stories. It needs to be told at the hearth and campfire. It needs to be sung. It needs to be danced. It needs to be expressed in liturgy and

art.” Second, “The role of the human in the bioregion is to appreciate and celebrate [Earth’s] diversity and to honor and preserve its vitality.” This is the arena of collective doing out of the new understanding. Third, the Earth is our community of spirit encounter.

I like the Center’s strategic frame for knowing, doing, and being the Earth community where we are. Every bioregion of the Earth needs to have such an Ecozoic Center for

- creatively promulgating the new story of the universe;
- substantially infusing all priorities with Earth-centeredness;
- spiritually reappropriating the Earth as our profound community.

Not only every bioregion, but every local community and every organization can do its knowing, doing, and being strategies aimed at bringing the Earth community to reality. What if schools, religious groups, businesses, and local governments did this and began to give form to the *great work of primary concern for the entire Earth community*?

Who instigates this *great work*? You have figured it out already: students, teachers, administrators of our schools; laity, clergy, and administrators of our religious groups; employees, owners, and board members of our businesses; citizens, employees, and officials of our local governments. Who are these people? You and I.

Because we are proud earthlings, we do all this so that Earth Day is celebrated every day, in every place we show up, and in every way we know, do, and be. We are moving from the exploitive Technozoic Era to the Ecozoic Era, where the Earth community is the primary concern.

<sup>2</sup>Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Contact Herman F. Greene, PO Drawer 12218, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2218.

***Reflection***

1. Who are examples of those committed to the Technozoic priority?
  
2. Who internationally and nationally are examples of those committed to the Ecozoic priority?
  
3. The following Ecozoic trends give me hope:
  
4. The following persons in my community/organizations are committed to the Ecozoic priority:
  
5. How might I join with these persons?
  
6. Of the three strategic directions in the meditation, the one that is key in my situation is
  
7. Three things I can do with others:
  - 
  - 
  -

## 32 *The Secular-Religious*

SECULAR-RELIGIOUS HUMANS were probably raised in a religious tradition, but now consider themselves secular in their beliefs, operating images, and style of life. They believe something, but are hardly doctrinaire. They have struggled mightily to come out from under the weight of the second-story worldview that Einstein and company have helped to obliterate once and for all.

These secular humans grimace when an athlete gets a hit, makes a touchdown, or sinks a long putt, and then looks up and points to the sky with humble thanksgiving, as though some force s/he calls “God” caused the play. If that be the case, the same “God” caused the defeat of the opponent in that same play, all of which does not make any sense.

What does it mean to say “God exists” when we do not believe *God* is up there or out there, or a person? For me it means that Spirit is always already present. *God* does not exist as we do. *God* is the creative force within creation—including our universe—calling it to deepest union.

I think that most secular humans would be uncomfortable using the word *God*, but would not be put off by *creative force*. These people only become “atheistic” when they are forced to believe much of the traditional doctrines that do not make sense to them—sort of a defense mechanism. If they are harassed with doctrine that does not make sense to them, they have cosmic permission to take a deep breath and let out a mighty “bull shit,” which the great Southern Baptist Carlisle Marney told us was good for the soul from time to time—a way of keeping the “Devil” at bay.

I do not believe that secular humans in the main are pessimistic, nihilistic followers of Nietzsche. They are like most of us in their secular operating images: we are born out of the union of our parents, we take good care of our bodies to live with more quality of life, family and friends are dear, freedom and responsibility are a big part of life, we

die and decompose, and memory of most of us lives on for a while.

Yet, most of these good secular humans yearn for something more. They experience what everybody experiences when they hold their babies for the first time, when they stand before a community and take solemn vows, when they are forgiven and when they forgive, when they are called to do what is just and right for those who need it most (even a polluted river), when they hold the hand of a dying loved one and say last words, and when they spread the loved one's ashes or put a rose on a loved one's casket before it is lowered into the ground.

This yearning or longing for something more is the other part of the equation of *secular-religious*. These same secular humans have experienced the awesome depth, holiness, and sacredness of life; and whether they can or care to voice it or not, they know they have had authentic religious rumblings within their souls. They have experienced that mysterious power that comes to every person and they too want to commune with it and even name it. And everyone does call it something, and many of its names are religious.

But they may not believe such traditional interpretations as the atonement of one for the sins of many; the resurrection of the body; salvation through Jesus, Buddha, or anybody else; "Heaven" up there; subservience of woman to man; that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus; that prayer is supernatural magic; that baptism keeps one from going to "Hell," *etcetera*.

These secular-religious humans are also the salt of the earth. They may be more authentic than the religious ones among us. They care as much as any human. They have had as many depth experiences of life as any of us. And they are the most of us in this secular age.

I believe—and it is the reason for this book—that the strategic thrust for the religions today is in response to this question: How do we communicate the depth, holy, and sacred dimension of life *to us all*, knowing we are all secular at least in our basic understandings, and that we are all deeply religious in our longing to be in communion with that at the heart of our being?

We are secular. We are religious. We are secular-religious.

A MILLENNIUM AGO, St. Symeon gave a great secular-religious

witness that makes sense to me after I tinkered with it the least bit:

*I know that the Invisible appears to me;  
I know that the Invisible who is outside the whole creation  
takes me into itself and hides me in its arms.  
I know that I shall not die, for I am within the Life,  
I have the whole of Life springing up within me.  
The Invisible within my heart is my heaven!*

### **Reflection**

1. I am more secular than religious.
2. I am more religious than secular.
3. I am secular-religious.
4. I underline the parts of the witness by Symeon that strike me.
5. I place question marks beside the parts of his witness that do not make sense to me on first reading.
6. How might I help these questionable parts make sense to me, by changing words, adding words, subtracting words?
  
7. My most heartfelt belief is

## 33 *New Spirit Mode*

A new sense of the earth and its revelatory import is arising. . . . The earth will not be ignored, nor will it long endure being despised, neglected, or mistreated. The dynamics of creation are demanding attention once more. . . . The vast mythic, visionary, symbolic world with its all-pervasive numinous qualities was lost. Because of this loss, we made our terrifying assault upon the earth. . . . Yet, finally, a reversal has begun, and the reality and value of the interior subjective numinous aspect of the entire cosmic order is being appreciated as the basic condition in which the [universe] story makes any sense at all. . . . All our human affairs . . . have their meaning precisely insofar as they enhance this . . . subjective intercommunion within the total range of reality. . . .

—Thomas Berry (*The Dream of the Earth*, pp. 134-37)

**WHAT WILL CREATE THE NEW ERA** for our Earth community is not so much what technology and science will do, but what authentic *intercommunion* will do. *Intercommunion*, “the ontological covenant of the universe” (Great Work, p. 148) is the *new spirit mode* being demanded today of all constituent parts within our universe. And what is not a constituent part? If we can name it, it is a constituent part. I like the word “constituent,” for it has the ring of being worthy of consideration within a constitution (although this type of inclusive universe language drives the UN crazy).

As I understand Berry, as we are encountered by the universe, the *numinous* is present. In these encounters with the universe our consciousness is born and reborn. For example, the revelation of Spirit happens to us in the unfolding universe process of the change of the seasons and through the evolution happening to us as we watch the Olympic Games openings in Atlanta and Sydney on TV and are proud of the thousands of *our* brothers and sisters from all over the Earth as they parade by and smile and wave.

For Berry the *new spirit mode* precedes new social justice. Our old human-centered story is giving way to the new universe-centered story built on the *new spirit mode*, where the order of the day is our bowing to each other in authentic mutual appreciation.

I mention bits of Berry's "Twelve Principles For Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process" (*New Cosmology*, pp. 107-8) to help focus the *new spirit mode* that is coming into being:

1. The universe [is] . . . the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.
2. . . . [E]ach being of the planet is profoundly implicated in the existence and functioning of every other being of the planet.
3. . . . [T]he universe is a psychic ['spiritual in origin or force'—*Merriam-Webster*] as well as a physical reality.
5. The universe . . . is consistently creative. . . .
6. The human is that being in whom the universe activates, reflects upon, and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness.
12. The main human task of the immediate future is to assist in activating the inter-communion of all the living and non-living components of the earth community. . . .

Operating out of these principles, a *new spirit mode* would eventuate in a fundamentally different future than if we continue to operate out of the old cultural mode. A few glaring examples of difference could be

- less humans killed in war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than the 100,000,000 killed in wars during the 20<sup>th</sup> century;
- a more equitable balance of wealth than last year, when the world's richest 225 people held \$1 trillion, which equaled the "wealth" of the world's poorest 2.5 billion people;
- the major religions taking sacrificial responsibility for the fate of the Earth community through a reinterpretation of all their teachings, out of a new context: *universe* salvation as well as personal salvation;
- transforming our use of natural resources, e.g., using up our petroleum resources within a two-hundred-year period, from about 1850 to 2050 (*Great Work*, p. 150).



As Berry writes, “we are moving into a new mythic age; it is little wonder that a kind of mutation is taking place in the entire earth-human order” (*Dream of the Earth*, p. 132). Let us pray for the emergence of the *new spirit mode* of intercommunion.

***Reflection***

1. The word “intercommunion” means to me
  
2. The qualities of *intercommunion* are
  
3. What would be in communion that is not now (i.e., the 225 wealthiest with the 2.5 billion poorest)?
  
4. Why are the religions not spearheading the *intercommunion*?
  
5. Why are the international corporations not spearheading the *intercommunion*?
  
6. Why are governments not spearheading the *intercommunion*?
  
7. Why are universities not spearheading the *intercommunion*?
  
8. Who is spearheading the *great work of intercommunion*, the *new spirit mode*?

## 34 *Radical Equality and Reconciliation*

### *Radical Equality*

*As 20<sup>th</sup> century born, I am not better,  
As a male, I am not better,  
As the last of the Cock children, I am not better,  
As a small town boy, I am not better,  
As an educated person, I am not better,  
As a Virginian, I am not better,  
As a southerner, I am not better,  
As an American, I am not better,  
As a westerner, I am not better,  
As a Caucasian, I am not better,  
As a Christian, I am not better,  
As a rich man, I am not better,  
As a human, I am not better,  
As an earthling, I am not better,  
As a creature of our universe,  
I am no better than any other  
creature in creation.*

THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF THESE UNITED STATES understood part of this truth. But if Jefferson were alive today, he would have seen how human-centered “The Declaration of Independence” is and would have been the champion of universe-centered equality. Maybe he would have written instead that “all *creatures* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” *All* are equal, every human, every creature, every piece of matter, every particle of dust. *God* shows no partiality. What is, is, and is good.

Lincoln wrote about the phrase “all men are created equal,” that it “shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.” Lincoln, too, if he were alive today, would have seen that tyranny and oppression are visited on all creation, and would have proclaimed that “all *creatures* are created equal.” Radical equality is the context for radical reconciliation.

An example of *radical reconciliation* in our time comes out of South Africa. Countless atrocities were committed during the deadliest years of apartheid, from 1960 to 1994, the year of South Africa's first free, multi-racial elections, which made Nelson Mandela president and produced a black majority government. In the era of white minority rule, 220 mostly black political activists were assassinated by state-sponsored death squads. The government detained 75,000 civilians without charges and swept up 3.5 million people from their homes at gunpoint. Participants on both sides of the conflict, as well as ordinary civilians, were tortured and killed.

In 1996, hearings began for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, under the actual banner of "Healing Through Truth." Its stated aims: record the violations of the past; acknowledge the suffering of the victims and assist in their rehabilitation; offer amnesty to past perpetrators; and facilitate healing and reconciliation for the nation.

The TRC offered perpetrators of violence a chance to repent and let them face the victims or their families. The TRC, over two and a half years, heard testimony from some 21,000 victims of apartheid, received over 7,000 applications for amnesty from perpetrators, and completed its work with a five-volume report of atrocities, 2700 pages long. The process moves on towards closure.

For victims and perpetrators, healing obviously began. On TV the nation saw the suffering—acknowledged and even revered it. Time will tell if national healing and reconciliation has happened. Nevertheless, a new model of radical reconciliation is in history:

The TRC process may be . . . *restorative* justice as opposed to *retributive* justice . . . where the guilty discover the pain of forgiveness because the innocent are willing to bear the greater pain of forgiving. Perhaps other nations with wounded histories may find in South Africa a model for hope. . . . Its attempt to uncover and deal with a brutal past goes further than any similar exercise in history. . . . Furthermore, the TRC's hearings seem to reach beyond the limitations of secular law, exploring new potentials for forgiveness and . . . reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

*Radical equality* and *radical reconciliation* are two of the human species' best breakthroughs, which portend better things to come, even for the whole creation. Where do such ideas come from? Rev. Peter Storey said, "Mandela, during his twenty-seven years in prison, came out with a message of forgiveness. Maybe it would be a good idea to send all leaders to prison for twenty-seven years before they lead."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peter Storey, *The Christian Century*, Sept. 10-17, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Storey, Virginia Conference of United Methodists, Norfolk, June 1999.

### ***Reflections***

1. My best example of *radical equality* is
2. My best example of *radical reconciliation* is
3. Why talk this stuff? A few good reasons: war torn nations and regions, broken relationships all over, holes in the ozone layer, disappearing rainforests, polluted rivers, large-scale famine, a widening gap between rich and poor, and nuclear proliferation. Other reasons come to my mind:
4. Why are *equality* and *reconciliation* always radical undertakings?
5. Jefferson, Lincoln, and Mandela. What motivated them to do works of *radical equality* and *reconciliation*?
6. What motivates us to do works of *radical equality* and *reconciliation*?

## 35 *Profound Community*

IS COMMUNITY A LOST ART? Not really. My mother was born into a large family whose survival depended upon all of them doing the farm. That focused mission was a foundation for their vibrant family community, a rarity today.

When I look at social contradictions, what is glaring is the absence of *authentic* community, at least in the West. We have been taught that what it means to be a human being is to fulfill our potential, to be the best we can be, to be successful, to achieve, *etcetera*. That is mostly *individual* focused brainwashing, which is not the essence of being human. We are a bunch of tired individuals who will never live up to the mantra of fulfilling our potential. That is a sure-to-fail goal, doomed by *sin*, as St. Paul reminds us, and *separation*, as Paul Tillich reminds us.

*Profound communities* elicit *profound individuals*. All of us live in community, whether it be family, religion, school, work, organization, recreation, neighborhood, city, region, nation, continent, planet, and universe. Quality of life is a swirling together of all the *profound communities* in which we live and move. We are individuals in community. That is the new common sense.

The big community questions: How do we grow more profound human beings? How do we catalyze authentic community, deepen it, spread it, and sustain it for the sake of those in the community and for the sake of those that are touched by its external mission, be they animal, vegetable, or mineral? How do we develop human pillars of iron around whom community happens? How do we call forth on-going, profound community that connects, awakens, calls, engages, and nurtures—whether in locales or social groups? In short, How do we build holistic communities of profound care?

Within a geographical community, if a confluence of locale-based and socio-based community actions took place that connect, awaken, call, engage, and sustain individuals within the different groups,

then that *total* community would be a demonstration of comprehensive care. Why is that not our vision in every geo-social community of which we are a part: again, whether family, religion, school, work, organization, recreation, neighborhood, city, region, nation, continent, planet, and universe?

The service of profound community is

- to operate in cooperative interdependence
- to care for the socio-economic-cultural well-being of all
- to intensify knowing, doing, and being within community
- to prepare the community for functional participation
- to provide the environment for quality living
- to practice caring
- to stimulate spirit consciousness
- to nurture foundational relationships
- to keep spirit alive
- to promote community where the *One*, the universe, and the self are held in reverence—in that order.

Profound human community is more than people in locality and organizations: we are essentially a people responding to the mystery, depth, and greatness experienced in our universe as we go about living our lives in our communities.

Living in and working with the three sub-villages of Kelapa Dua, about an hour's drive—on a good day—from Jakarta, Indonesia, the song the villagers and we loved to sing the most was *Hello, Kelapa Dua* to the national tune of *Halo Bandung*. It was the song of a profound community.

Hello, Kelapa Dua,  
 Are you standing tall this day?  
 Hello, Kelapa Dua,  
 Are you moving in every way?  
 The world is all waiting  
 To see just what you'll do right now,  
 So stand tall for all of Indonesia to see,  
 Kelapa Dua for history.



## 36 *Value Begins With Sacredness*

SOME NORTHWESTERN NATIVE AMERICANS began each day as they walked out into the nearby water, clapped four times in recognition of the mystery of life in all directions, turned to leave, and clapped two more times. They walked into the day knowing that all they encountered for the rest of the day was sacred. Before they went to sleep at night, they clapped two more times and said an *amen* to their day-long ritual of sacredness.

The *Mutant Message Down Under* tells about the Australian aboriginal people, as they also stood before the rising sun, beginning each day with a corporate ritual. They too walked back into the day understanding that the rest of it was sacred until the next morning ritual.

Aboriginal people of each continent of planet Earth have understood that life is sacred as the essential human understanding, or spiritual understanding. We non-aboriginal, educated, post-modern people of today do not have the same understanding, especially those of us dominated by western ideas espoused by Marxism and capitalism, wherein our essential understanding of the good and happy life is to be economically secure, individually and socially.

Economic values tyrannize our education, government, religion, family, and social life—especially our work. The economic dimension of life is sacred to us, not the mystery of life, not the universe, not the human race. True, most aboriginal people alive today cannot compete with us western-minded people economically. They just die out or are assimilated to our cultural values of economic overemphasis. Also true, we cannot compete with them on their playing field where the object of the game is to recognize that all of life is sacred, a gift from the great mystery to be received with thanksgiving and shared universally.

So all the talk about values of late under the guise of “family values” is right on, except slanted and reduced. What we *are* sure of is that the values we are operating out of as westerners are not producing. Not producing what? The quality of life we were promised and have



been searching for.

All nations can rise up, prosper, educate their people, feed and immunize all their children, extend life expectancy, and operate out of efficient economic methods. But what will become of their values? The present global trend indicates their values will become less human, more violent and threatening to all manner of life on the planet and in the universe. Why? The aboriginal peoples' answer: *life is not seen as sacred*.

What if we did a flip-flop on our one-minute manager techniques? What if we replaced listing the ten things we are going to do today with a walk to the river, four claps, and then two—or some ritual of our choosing? What if our ritual prepared us to see the rest of the day with all of its situations and encounters as sacred? Would it make a difference? Of course. Maybe we would be more conscious of living the day in a spirit of tolerance and genuine care in each encounter. Such is the direction of the new revolution in humanness, the sacred revolution, let's call it. And the revolution won't happen unless it can also happen in the workplace.

All religions have emphasized beginning the day with rituals which bring to consciousness the mystery, depth, and greatness of the universe and existence in it. For example, the Buddhists have emphasized meditating at the beginning of the day until one is prepared to live the day in quickened consciousness throughout the day.

The sacred revolution is about *being*: grace, consciousness, attentiveness, peace, perspective, attitude, union, spirit, praise, surrender, emptiness, fullness, detachment, contemplation, meditation, prayer. The sacred revolution is about *presence*: compassion, honor, dedication, heart, suffering for, attachment, chastity, care, service. All of these are universal qualities of humanness. We are born with the capacity for each, yet we must practice the art. Does the art come naturally? No and yes.

Out of communion with all that is comes value. Sacredness is not an add-on to our lives but the way life is. Let us be still and know—and get our values straightened out, not by whom we vote for, but by what we do out of the sacredness of our hearts.

***Reflection***

1. I practice/do not practice a daily ritual that puts me in touch with the sacredness of life.

2. The ritual that I practice (or wished that I practiced) can be described this way:

3. This ritual does (would do) what for me daily?

- 
- 
- 

4. Orientals often begin their business day with a ritual, even before altars with candles and incense that remain visible in their place of business. Why don't westerners?

5. If I were to devise such a place of ritual in home or workplace, what would it contain?

6. What would be/are key components of my ritual?

- 
- 
- 

7. What is stopping me?

## 37 *Is This America's Guernica?*

THE ATTENTION given the movie *American Beauty* on the season's film award shows worked on us. We paid our seven bucks a ticket and went in to see the death of an era going on bigger than life on the screen. I came out angry and in despair.

Last year, about this same time, we went to see *Life is Beautiful*, knowing it had won three Academy awards. This human drama about a father's love and sacrifice for his five-year-old son, to keep him from the gas showers in an Italian concentration camp toward the end of World War II, is full of transforming power. We were left with the reflection that life is beautiful even in the midst of its tragedy.

*American Beauty*, on the other hand, is a human drama of a family in an American concentration camp, called the suburbs, circa 1999. Life comes out dysfunctional, meaningless, and a nearly utter tragedy, with little redemption running through it. However, some critics point to Kevin Spacey's liberation campaign as redemptive. I would ask them if doing what makes you *feel* free regardless of who gets hurt is redeeming. Others point to his teenage daughter's decision to get away from it all and start a new life as a redeeming element. I would ask them if redemption for her is going off to New York with the young drug dealer next door, the messed-up son of the messed-up Marine colonel, who has also messed-up his wife's life irreparably.

Yet, maybe the redemption in this movie is to put before us all the sordid results of the tragedy of life in America at this time, as Picasso's *Guernica* showed the tragedy in Spain under the Hitler-like Franco some sixty years before. What is the despot portrayed in *American Beauty*? Maybe it is the false image of the *good life* that has damaged the souls of its victims and has come to a dead-end according to this movie. As my son the urban planner pointed out, a movie that shoots down the myth of the suburban *good life* can't be all bad.

In the playwright's radio interview, I heard no indication that he had done much thinking about the *great work* of our time or *our way*

into the future.

Looking at Picasso's *Guernica* and letting our raw response come, we are left with a sense of tragedy with no purpose, at first. But as we deal with the slaughter and pathos depicted on the huge canvass, we begin to see the light, quite literally, in this black, white, and gray painting. Later we read that Picasso was out to change world opinion about the atrocities in his homeland committed by the Franco fascists. Because the change was dramatic, some call *Guernica* the most effective piece of social art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*American Beauty*, the winner of five Academy awards this year and a following of millions of viewers around the world, is hardly in a league with *Guernica* or *Life Is Beautiful*. I write this meditation to begin to deal with my anger over the whole event, especially with the critics who too often are as banal in their judgments as that which they judge: the ones, for example, who touted the rose pedals and the windblown balloon scenes as great art.

As I cool down, it comes to me that if this is a true art form, it will speak to us deeply. I do hope the moviegoers go back home and to work and school with some real questions, like

- What makes community life-giving?
- How do we make work fulfilling?
- How can we bless all beings in our relationships?
- How do we bond as families?
- Why not life-education rather than job-education?
- How do we build peace rather than build up the military?
- How do we downsize violence in the movies and the media?
- Why buy half- to one-million-dollar houses and SUVs?
- What is my vocation?
- How do we re-image freedom and responsibility?
- How do we pull off the United Nations' fifteen-year plan?
- and in general, How do we get spirit back into life?

This overrated movie has driven me to rededicate myself to write about life's meaty questions that are good for the soul. Ask yourself, "What is my vision for the future?" even if *American Beauty's* vision is futility. It may have won at the box office, but. . . .

**Reflection**

1. I have seen *American Beauty*.
2. I have looked at *Guernica*.
3. My favorite movie is
4. My favorite painting is
5. What is the purpose of art?
  
6. Life's deep questions encountered me in what movie or art form? My life was particularly addressed by
  
7. What makes a piece of art profound?
  
8. What would you like to say to the movie producers of our day? Write one of them a short note:

## 38 *A Good Day*

*"What is, is," she said.*

"HI, HONEY. DID YOU HAVE A GOOD DAY?" This is a hard question to answer. Did everything go right? Did I feel good? Any problems I couldn't handle? Did I shoot a good score? Did I make good grades? Were the kids good?

What does this question mean? On the one hand it comes to us as a moral question. Did I do right? Did others do right? It is also a psychological question. Did I feel good or bad about what happened? These are the questions we usually answer: Did I do well? or Did I feel good about it? Neither of these is the deepest question, however.

The day is neither good nor bad. It just is. *Is-ness* has to do with ontology. The day just *is*. We can say the day *is a part of being*, something that *is*. Further, what *is*, is beyond the moral or the psychological. Right/wrong and feel good/bad about what happens are natural human responses, but they are not the ultimate gauge of what a good day is.

We can go further. We have to respond to what *is*, for that's a big part of what it means to be human. When asked, we reflect upon the day as good or bad or a mixture of both—whether vocally or not. What resource are we using to answer the question of a good day? Is it a value judgment, a feeling judgment, or a spirit judgment?

By spirit judgment I am referring to a decisive response. I am aware that I can answer *Yes* or *No* to the question Did you have a good day? And I am aware at times that when I answer that question, I am making a decision about life in general, not just a day of life. Then I am answering the question Am I having a good life?

The life-question is waiting on me to answer, and my answer is the depth gauge of who I see that I am and where I see that I stand in relation to life, at that moment. If so, the question "Is life good?" becomes transparent. Other facets of this same question are Is my past good? and Is my future going to be good? and Is my life as it is, right now,

good? These are the spirit questions that the simple question Did you have a good day? can trigger.

Rather than asking “How you doing?” which is the same as asking “Did you have a good day?” I ask, “How’s your life?” which is a more piercing question and draws forth all sorts of hem and haw answers.

These life-questions come to all self-conscious human beings. For life’s answers we usually go to our religious and cultural traditions. For me, I start at the beginning of my tradition, where it says “God created all that is and declared it not only good, but very good.” Is it therefore natural for me to say all is good as it is created? No. It is not natural at all. It is a decision of faith, trusting that life as it is constituted is ultimately and unconditionally good, as I am guided by the truth of my tradition.

When I say, “Yes, I am having a very good day!” I am making a decision that is not dependent upon my moral and feeling judgments. I am affirming that *the way life is*, is good, that the past is approved, that the future is open, and that my life, as it is, is acceptable to all that was, is, and ever shall be.

Incredible? or Incredible!

***Reflection***

1. I list 5-10 significant events of my day today.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Did the day go right? Yes or no?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Did the day feel right? Yes or no?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Was it a good day? Yes or no?—no in-between.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Are these moral answers, psychological answers, or spirit answers?  
How so?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Is it possible for me to give thanks for my day, just as it really has been?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What have I learned about my relationship to life in this reflection?



## 39 *Meditative Council*<sup>1</sup>

THE REAL RELIGIOUS QUESTION is, “Am I consecrated to *God* on behalf of creation?” To be a consecrated person one does the radically free and universally loving deed, regardless of creed or no creed.

We do not ask whether or not Bonhoeffer or Gandhi were Christian, but whether they did the consecrated deed. They both lived exemplary lives. Both men loved life and held it to be a sacred gift; both operated out of grace, possibility, freedom, and compassion; both became prisoners fighting the oppressors of large segments of humanity, ultimately sacrificing their lives tackling the slaughtering Nazi regime and the suppressive British Empire at that time. One was a devout Christian minister—though controversial; the other was not formally religious, though a devoutly religious person by universal consensus. Both men were exemplary in spirit and mission. Their common mission was to deal with the “poor in spirit,” whether rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, friend or jailer.

Were these two men “Christian”? Some would say only Bonhoeffer was, yet others would say he was not because of his attempt on Hitler’s life and his later thinking and writings. Almost all would agree with Gandhi when he said he was *not* a Christian, although he had the greatest respect for Jesus and The Sermon on the Mount.

They were *consecrated to God* on behalf of creation. These two sit on my *meditative council*.

Each of us has an *interior council* who guides us, to whom we listen. This is part of what it means to be human. Let us try to make this council more self-conscious. Some of them are religious, some consecrated, some neither one.

### *Reflection*

1. Who are my *ten* interior council members, dead or alive, historical or fictional, who guide me, to whom I listen most? A non-human can be



7. Where am I in the process of making a decision about my struggle?

8. How do I put a new member on my council?

9. How do I take one off?

10. Is Jesus, or the founder of my religious tradition, on my council?  
Why or why not?

11. How do I intentionally commune with my council?

12. What might I tell a young one about her/his *interior council*?

13. What is my council telling me might be/is my mission in life?

14. What is my council telling me about consecration to *God* on behalf of creation?

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from my *The Transparent Event*, pp.204-07.

## 40 *Primal Hero?*

JOHN MACQUARRIE SAYS THAT JESUS is *the Jew* in relation to Judaism, *the Lord* in relation to the church, and *the authentic human* in relation to the human race (*Christology Revisited*, p. 106).

I want to stand up tall in my Christian tradition in this meditation, but feel that I must make the disclaimer again that I have made throughout this book: Jesus is *not the only way* into a fulfilling relationship with God. The *Christ event* is not only manifest in Jesus, but everywhere that we humans are addressed by the word that life is good and our lives are good. Through the other great religions? Absolutely.

So what I say here and in this book about Jesus is confessional, my witness to truth as I perceive it. For me to say *Jesus* is the Christ, I have to concede that in him and through him I transparently see the quintessence of the graciousness at the heart of life. I see *Godliness* through Jesus. Not that Jesus is *God*, but without Jesus I do not have the most profound understanding of the significance of life as given, lived out, and sustained by the grace of *God*. What is *Godliness* like in human form? My best answer is Jesus, who personifies grace and love in my tradition's story. I enter the kingdom of *God* in communion with Jesus. Maybe this is the same as saying Jesus is my primal hero.

If we do not see Jesus as *the human hero*, then who or what? This is the reason so many of us are focused on Jesus, I do believe, whether we know it or not. Each of us has a human hero/ine, else no new human beings emerge among us. As Bernard Malamud writes, "Without heroes, we . . . don't know how far we can go." The *authentic human* is the one who mirrors the profound images of humanness.

Jesus is the *primal hero* for me in that he is the *omega point*, as Teilhard de Chardin wrote, or as the St. Paul wrote about Jesus, he will make of us a *new creation*. There really is a force in life that compels us as humans. It is not so much a something that we are bent upon achieving as a something that is drawing us forth, calling us. That primal human image is Jesus, for Christians, at least. His image of what it means to be

human influences the over two billion Christians today, and many more.

Does this mean Jesus is the high-water mark of humanness? Yes, for me he fills full the meaning of man and woman. Joseph Mathews, in his *Christ of History* says it this way:

[The Jesus hero] represents the way things are for all [humans]. . . .

This eschatological hero is then the portraiture of what human living actually is. . . .

[The Jesus model] is a dramaturgical embodiment of [the authentic] life stance or posture. To follow in the steps of the representational Jesus is not to imitate his words or reproduce his deeds. It is to be and do as a free [human] . . . as he depicted. . . .

It is to walk out across the uncertain, ambiguous, anxious deeps of . . . life in gratitude, humility and compassion, with the sure confidence that this very walking is the meaning of life. . . . In this sense, [the Jesus model] guides their thoughts and deeds, their words and feelings. It is the context in which and out of which they forge their concrete actions. . . .

As he lived his life as the meaning of his life, and announced the cosmic permission for all . . . thus to live, so the church understands that she can and must go and do likewise. As Luther said, the Christians are to be little Christs (pp. 22-4).

For me, Jesus defines what it means to be human. At least a third to half of the world's population knows the story of Jesus well enough to understand what I'm saying, that Jesus is a (the) model of full humanness, the *authentic human* of the species, our high-water mark.

If Jesus is not our *primal hero*, who is? If he is, how do we keep him at the center of our consciousness so that he inspires the shape of being human in our heart of hearts?



## *Epilogue: The Movement*

The Great Work before us . . . is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. . . . We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task. . . . The nobility of our lives . . . depends upon the manner in which we come to understand and fulfill our assigned role.

—Thomas Berry (*The Great Work*, p. 7)

THE **GOOD LIFE** IS NOT “grasping after greater wealth to sustain a ‘better life’ that we perceive as ‘progress.’” According to Berry, this mode of consumerism is our “pathology” and “addiction” (*GW*, p. 116). Likewise, the good life is not measured by GHP: “A rising *gross human product* with a declining gross Earth product is surely a contradiction” (p. 74). And the good life is not glorification of the human: “Both our religious and our humanist traditions are primarily committed to an anthropocentric exaltation of the human” (p. 104), at the expense of greater values. “[O]ur human ethics are derivative from the ecological imperative. The basic ethical norm is the well-being of the comprehensive community and the attainment of human well-being within that community” (p. 105).

So what are some new strategies for the good life? “[C]ommunity-supported agriculture, solar-hydrogen energy system, re-design of our cities, elimination of the automobile in its present form, restoration of local village economies, education for a post-petroleum way of life, and a jurisprudence that recognizes the rights of natural modes of being” (p.110). Our present pace of the *old good life* is simply not sustainable according to Berry. “What is needed is a sustainable way of life” (p. 114) and a “sustainable future” (p.133). “[A]ny recovery of the natural world in its full splendor will require not only a new economic system but a conversion experience deep in the psychic structure of the human” (p. 60). A conversion from the *old good life*—that doesn’t work—to the *new good life* of *intercommunion* with the universe is the objective of the *great work*.

These manifesto-style words by Thomas Berry indicate *Our Way Into the Future*, the sub-title of *The Great Work*. He reminds us it took about fifteen billion years for the universe and 4.6 billion years for the Earth to emerge to this point; and only ten thousand years for us humans to gain significant control over the Earth (p. 50). How long will it take for us to come into a compassionate and responsible management of that which is entrusted to our care, to become *good* stewards of the universe?

The thesis of the *good life* we have been putting forth in this book of meditations is that of the *profound human journey*. Within primal communion we are awakened to, formed for, engaged in, and sustained for the *great work*, which is the good life of universe stewardship. This *great work* is our calling that can set us free.

Earlier we talked about Moses being awakened, formed, and sustained for the *great work* of setting *God's* chosen people free. Today we are being awakened, formed, and sustained for the *great work* of setting *God's* universe free, which was the assignment from the beginning, but we humans got carried away with serving human desires rather than the needs of the universe. Now we have been called again to the real task of caring for the universe. If we answer this call, liberation of all *God's* humans will also be done, and immeasurably better than before.

The main way we humans are liberated is caring for the universe-wide neighbor that Berry has convincingly described. How will that liberation come to be? By our creating and joining *the* movement. I again quote Berry's opening to *The Great Work*: "History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people" (p. 1).

Therefore, our mandate is to help create the movement of *those who care for the universe*. We know there are hundreds of movements abroad that are comprehensive. One could even call the United Nations a movement and applaud its recent fifteen-year plan for the Earth and all its constituents, including water, various species, and the atmosphere, as well as us six billion humans. But this is not *the* movement Berry is talking about.



*The* movement we are talking about is the *intercommunion* of creation as we know it, bound together in some self-conscious network of care. The primary hope for this moment in evolution is our deeper consciousness of the Spirit presence in creation. Throughout our meditations we have emphasized motivation for the *great work*, and we have said that the heart of that motivation is Spirit renewal. If the movement of *those who care for the universe* is not grounded in the Spirit it will fail. If it is grounded in Spirit, there will be no force great enough to stop it.

Who can stop a movement on which every being's life depends?

Who can stop a movement that is history long, universe wide, and Spirit deep?

Who can stop a movement with a membership of all species, all peoples, all cultures, all religions, and all sectors?

Who can stop a movement that's out to protect every being's home, every being's rights, and every being's best interests?

Who can stop a movement that is the big tent for all caring movements?

Be careful in trying to stop this movement. Be enhanced by advancing it.

It's a movement whose time has come.

It's a movement worth body and soul.

This is a movement of *intercommunion*.

To be in this movement, this *great work*, is to be living the *good life*.

The Spirit, the call, the story, the mandate, and *we* are creating the movement of *those who care for the universe*.

May we be so motivated.

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## *About the Author*

**John Cock** wrote his memoir, *Called To Be: A Spirit Odyssey*, upon the completion of three careers: one in teaching, one in the service of the church as a minister and, along with his wife and two sons, as a member of the family Order: Ecumenical—living in inner-cities of the U.S. and in villages of India and Indonesia—and the third one back in his hometown in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia as a shop owner and downtown revitalizer. In his fourth career he is a writer, having published his second book, *The Transparent Event: Post-Modern Christ Images*, a secular-religious view of the meaning of life. He is also a traveling teacher, spirit guide, community facilitator, and grandfather, who pulls Kaitlyn and Nolan to the park in the red *Radio Flyer* wagon.



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—**R. Brian Stanfield**, author of *The Courage To Lead*

### About the Author

**John P. Cock** is a traveling spirit guide who grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. He and his family were members of the family Order: Ecumenical for most of two decades, living in inner-cities of the United States and in villages of Indonesia and India. His books include *The Transparent Event: Post-Modern Christ Images* and his memoir, *Called To Be: A Spirit Odyssey*.

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