

Composed and presented by Rev. Priscilla Geisterfer for the Unitarian Fellowship of  
Fredericton on October 28, 2012

### **Remembering Who We Are—Remembering Our Deepest Truth**

Last time I was here, I invited us all to learn to live love in a world of fear. Basically what I suggested was that we reimagine the world we live in and create within it a world of compassion. To do this I suggested that Love was your deepest truth. Today, I am going to deepen this idea of our deepest truth and invite us all to embark on a journey of discovery toward remembering who we are. I will do this by starting in the world we live in and then inform this experience with some ancient wisdom from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Taosim.

Many things stimulated this talk for me...but the clincher was really the way people in our world today seem to like to communicate with their fellow human journeyers. For example, have you noticed that people today are really getting into telling people what their households look like? Yes! They do this by using stickers with caricatures of the members of their family and putting them on the rear windows of their cars. Today people are trying to communicate with the world they live in by telling others who they are. And, this caricature communication is getting complex...people can now get stickers that express certain career choices or leisure activities, the sports their children do and suggestions of age and even race. And if you are an animal lover, even this can have expression on your rear window.

One day, as I was driving into town, I noticed one of these communications that just had two children represented and a cat, or maybe it was two cats. I had never seen anyone leave the parents out and I had always wondered if any gay families were getting caught up in this new trend. So I paid more attention to the vehicle wondering why this family hadn't been more verbose. It was this extra attention that enabled me to see the pride or rainbow sticker that was on the bumper. I immediately got the picture and the message. Theirs was a cryptogram, which allowed me to catch a glimpse of who this family is and how they want others to see them. They are revealing only what they want others to know.

So now I ask, who are you? Who do you tell others that you are? What do you tell yourself? Or better yet, what do you ask yourself?

Each of us at some point in our lives has asked ourselves "Who am I?" And sometimes, we search this out by greeting those we meet and asking "Who are you?" So let's try this out here right now. Lets ask who you are...

Let's begin with you... "Who are you?"

(Give people a chance to respond and listen to what they say.)

Listen to how many of you have responded ... many began with the words "I am." What if all we said was I am, would that be enough? In our world we feel that this

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short phrase is simply an introduction to the signifiers that follow. Some of you have stated your name, others have included your families, your work, or career, whether you have animals or not. What if all of this was simply too much information and cluttered the essence of who you are? What if “I am” is enough.

In ancient wisdom literature, this question of “who are you?” is actually quite recurrent. For example, in the Hebrew literature the prophet Moses asks this question to the divine when he has an encounter with YHWH through the burning bush. And YHWH tells Moses to go to the Pharaoh asking him to free the Hebrews. Moses says “who me? Are you kidding? The Pharaoh will never listen to me.” So YHWH says to Moses, “Tell the Pharaoh that I sent you.” Moses is dumbfounded. He says “Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt.” Here Moses is not only concerned that the Pharaoh will not believe him but he questions the Israelites acceptance of his claim to speak for YHWH. So he asks “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” In other words, Who are you?

The response that Moses gets is, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh has sent me to you.’ Ehyeh is best translated as the verb “to be” connoting pure existence—being—a presence that cannot be seen or touched but which is most certainly there. Interesting don’t you think? Here we have a name that is not a name as soon as it is uttered. This is interesting because in the Hebrew literature the name for divine essence is unutterable. It cannot be spoken. Four letters refer to it and when they are encountered textually the reader or speaker is instructed to make reference to it rather than to try to pronounce it. It is common to hear people do as I have done and refer to divine presence as “the name.” And when Moses asks the name for a name to speak, that which is given is a non-name. Rather than a referent it is an act “being.” For anyone to speak this act would require them to say “I am.” Do hear this...?

To say the name of divine presence according to the Hebrew understanding is to claim it for yourself in the first person. “I Am.” Are you wondering why this would be so?

Let me illuminate the path... In the creation story of the Hebrew literature there are two stories. The understanding we seek comes in the second story wherein, and let me read it to you: Gen 2:7, the gods YHWH fashioned the human person—dust from the soil—and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life so that the human person became a living being.

What is interesting here is that the word for human person in this text is the same as that for soil. In other words, once a soil being receives divine breath it becomes a living being according to this text. (That would definitely shake some of the abortion debates wouldn’t it?)

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You see, this story reflects the ancient understanding that at death that which is of the divine goes to the divine, and that which is of earth returns to earth. Hence the phrase we might be familiar with, breath to breath, dust to dust. The religious understanding is that the breath continues and the dust is complete.

So perhaps when we say the name of divine presence as the utterance of "I Am" we are making reference to the divine breath that we hold in the soil of our beings.

Do you think this is a stretch? Well Jesus didn't.

In Christian literature, or perhaps I should say in literature that has been accepted as revelatory for the Christian tradition, and much of it written by groups that identified as Christian Jews or Jewish Christians, Jesus of Nazareth, the historical figure that many refer to as the Christ elaborated through the use of metaphor to what this might have meant.

Jesus had many followers who were so impressed with the way he was in the world that even though they knew him as Jesus of Nazareth they would ask him, "Who are you?"

Once when he was asked he said, "I am the light..."

Another time he answered, "I am the gate..."

And yet another time he spoke out, "I am the way, the truth, the life..."

For a very long time the standard interpretation of these sayings was that Jesus was referring to himself as a divinity through which one needed to pass in terms of a belief system in order to enter "the kingdom of heaven."

This is not the helpful reading and it is not a reading that is supported by the wisdom literature of diverse traditions and particularly not the Hebrew literature.

Without going into too much depth let me simply clarify that the kingdom of heaven is this life we live on earth. It becomes heaven when we participate in divine presence and co-create a world of peace and harmony through being.

When Jesus, or anyone for that matter says "I am" and then pauses there, they immediately participate in divine presence. The problem is that we never stop there...

Jesus was not coming up with the metaphors he used on his own. Neither were these metaphors unknown to the groups within which he spoke.

We find references to The Way, to the gate and to the idea of truth in Buddhism and in the Tao Te Ching, the wisdom literature of China which it is believed to have informed Buddhism. One of the verses that is often used as the first saying in the Tao Te Ching reads as follows:

From the Jonathan Star translation:

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A way that can be walked  
is not The Way  
A name that can be named  
is not The Name

Tao (The Way) is both Named and Nameless  
As Nameless, it is the origin of all things  
As Named it is the mother of all things

A mind free of thought,  
merged within itself,  
beholds the essence of Tao  
A mind filled with thought,  
Identified with its own perceptions,  
beholds the mere forms of this world

Tao and this world seem different  
but in truth they are one and the same  
The only difference is in what we call them

How deep and mysterious this unity  
How profound, how great!  
It is the truth beyond the truth,  
The hidden within the hidden  
It is the path to all wonder,  
the gate to the essence of everything!

Did you hear them, the references to The Way, the gate, to truth. This is a text that some believe to have preceded the Jesus era by about 3-4 hundred years. Did Jesus know of it you may ask? Probably not, or, just as probable, perhaps. This we cannot know for certain and it really doesn't matter. What matters is that the metaphors used are not unknown. Even in the Ancient Near East many religious paths used such ideas to explain the presence of divinity within earthly existence.

In these ancient cultures, every city had a gate and the gate was the one place that they believed that divine presence was present alongside human experience. (Victor Matthews, *The Social World of Ancient Israel*) In the literature this idea of the gate became a metaphor for the place within the human person where divinity resides which is the heart.

Informed by the placing of the metaphor of the gate within the human heart, which, by the way, is also in use in Buddhism, we can go back to our Tao Te Ching and understand a bit of the idea of "The hidden within the hidden"—divine presence within our heart. From this perspective the whole idea of the "I Am" as divine being is connected both to our breath and to our heart. What we must understand though

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is that the heart is not a container for divine presence for this cannot be contained it  
is merely a space/or place to engage this presence within the human. And again this  
is not for others to engage within us but for us to engage for ourselves and then for  
the world.

So let us walk through this verse of the Tao Te Ching with a bit more discussion.

A way that can be walked  
is not The Way  
A name that can be named  
is not The Name

In these first two verses we begin to hear the relationship between that which is  
tangible and that which is intangible. And do you hear here a parallel to the Hebrew  
reference to divinity as the YHWH (The Name) rather than through naming? The  
Buddhists would describe this as the relationship between form and formlessness,  
who you are in the world in relation to the essence of who you really are.

Tao (The Way) is both Named and Nameless (both form and  
formlessness)  
As Nameless, it is the origin of all things (formlessness)  
As Named it is the mother of all things (form)

A mind free of thought,  
merged within itself, (formless)

This is the mind in its most vast state. Clear your mind and then let that vast mind  
merge with the vastness. In this merging all distinction ceases and pure existence is  
palpable.

This...

          beholds the essence of Tao

A mind filled with thought,  
Identified with its own perceptions,  
          beholds the mere forms of this world (form)

Now fill your mind with thoughts and identify with each thought. Are you getting  
overwhelmed? Do you feel as if your mind is too small to contain each thought? This  
is investment in form.

Tao and this world seem different  
          but in truth they are one and the same  
The only difference is in what we call them

When we describe ourselves according to our name our familial relationships, our  
career, our hobbies, or any identity beyond "I am" we enter immediately into form  
that which we are in the world. When we pause with "being," pure existence we

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engage the formlessness of our lives. This formlessness is that which connects us to divine presence in all its forms as they are expressed in the world as a whole. Do you know what I am talking about? It is very complex and the surprising thing is that it is the most natural thing for most children. Children seem to be able to be and not be at the same time. As they grow they tend to slowly get overtaken by the dependence of our world on form.

I was once sent this story of 5 year old child that had just received a new baby sister. The child was often found strangely close to the new baby and repeatedly she asked if she could please spend some time alone with her new sister. The parents were reluctant because they were not sure if there was jealousy at play. The persistence of their five year old finally won out and they rigged up a baby monitor in the room and put the baby in the crib so the five year old could not harm her. Then they invited the five year old to have a moment alone, but not too long. As soon as the older daughter was alone with the baby she rushed to her little sister and said, "Hurry hurry, I don't have much time. Tell me about God I'm beginning to forget!"

Sometimes we call this presence by a name, sometimes we know it only through namelessness.

Sometimes we completely identify with all the forms that we hold in the world. Sometimes they just seem too cumbersome and we need to be free of them. In order to remember who we really are we need to be able to say "I am" and let this be enough, for it truly is. Then we need to be able to balance this formlessness with who we are in the world. Fully formless and fully form this is the Tao of you!