

“THE MYSTERY BEYOND ALL KNOWING”

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Call to Gather: from Sonia Sanchez

Let there be everywhere our voices, our eyes, our thoughts, our love, our actions, breathing hope [into our world.]¹

Reading: “The Bat” by Jane Kenyon

I was reading about rationalism,
the kind of thing we do up north
in early winter, where the sun
leaves for the day at 4:15.

Maybe the world *is* intelligible
to the rational mind:
and maybe we light the lamps at dusk
for nothing. . . .

Then I heard wings overhead.

The cats and I chased the bat
in circles—living room, kitchen,
pantry, kitchen, living room. . . .
At every turn it evaded us

like the identity of the third person
in the Trinity: the one
who spoke through the prophets,
the one who astounded Mary
by suddenly coming near.²

Sermon

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http://books.google.com/books?id=bN2AiDIffEC&pg=PA167&lpg=PA167&dq=sonia+sonchez+Let+the+re+be+everywhere+our+voices&source=bl&ots=qsCpJPsjvV&sig=qDL4TJBjspNJgp4RiQaLe359mPE&hl=en&ei=HuUsS56gIJO11Af_se2UBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=7&ved=0CCAQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=&f=false

² Jane Kenyon, “The Bat,” in *Cries of the Spirit*, Marilyn Sewell, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 240.

For the past several years, I've begun my theological self-definition with these two words: "agnostic polytheistic"—as in "I'm an agnostic polytheistic..." Many of you have accurately noted that "agnostic" and "polytheistic" are blatantly contradictory labels. I prefer to think of them as paradoxical. They summarize part of the paradox inherent in my eclectic belief system: I fundamentally am not sure if there is any such thing as the divine. If there is, then it makes sense to me that we'd have a lot of different pictures of what the divine is or might look like. For me, "agnostic polytheistic" is not an either/or proposition, but is both/and: I am agnostic, and I am polytheistic.

The polytheistic aspect of my belief system is why I'm a Unitarian (Universalist) who finds the Trinity in Christianity appealing. (Uh oh, here's another contradiction—a Unitarian Trinitarian! Not surprisingly, I also prefer to label this one a paradox.) I like the Trinity because rather than expressing one view of the divine, it invites us to picture the divine in three ways: as God, as Jesus and as the Holy Spirit—or, to use language often used by liberal Christians—as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

I don't take the Trinity literally: I don't think that the divine is literally God the Creator, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Rather, for me, these are human-created pictures of the divine. They are no more—and no less—than very compelling and beautiful human snapshots of the divine.

As a polytheist, I find Hinduism even more appealing. The Hindu pantheon, with its millions of different deities, makes three pictures of God—and our Unitarian belief in the oneness of the God—seem a bit meager. How powerful to picture the divine as a wild, beautiful man with a snake around his neck dancing in a graveyard (Siva), or a voluptuous earth mother (Shakti), or a beautiful blue-skinned boy playing a flute (Krishna), or a crazy, long-haired woman with weapons in her hand and a chain of skulls around her neck (Kali), or a kind, roly-poly elephant-headed man (Ganesh). Each one of these—and a million other Hindu deities—suggests a truth about the divine.

Returning to the Christian Trinity, my favorite one of the three is the Holy Spirit. I love the message conveyed by this symbol of the divine: that the divine is everywhere around us, and even within us. It infuses all life—all we need to do is recognize it's around and within us even though we can't see it. A quilt Francie Ginocchio created that hangs in my office reminds me of this. It pictures a village with spirit figures dancing above in the air. Smoke flows out of the chimney of one of the houses in the village and dances all through the scene, interweaving everything. The smoke ends with an upward trajectory into the sky. At the top of the quilt are these words: "Spirit in the sky." And at the bottom: "Or elsewhere."

Smoke is frequently used as a symbol of spirit, as is flame. So our flaming chalice is, among other things, a symbol of spirit. When we sing the hymn "Spirit of Life," we conjure up a flame with smoke rising from it as the sign for "spirit." Other common symbols of spirit are the rushing wind and the breath. Hindus also use salt water as a symbol for spirit. In the Upanishads, a sage instructs his son:

"Put some salt in this water and bring it to me in the morning." So the son stirred salt into the water and the next morning he brought it to (his father).

"Fetch me the salt that you put (in this) yesterday."

"I cannot, father."

“Then taste the water from this end. How does it taste?”
“Salty.”
“Taste the water from that end. How does it taste?”
“Salty.”
“That which you cannot grasp, but can taste in every drop, That is
the Real. That is *atman* (soul or spirit). That art thou, my son.”³

These symbols of spirit suggest qualities of the spirit: it’s omnipresent like air; it’s important like breath; yet it’s intangible, hard to see but in some sense real, like smoke or the wind or salt in water.

In the Christian tradition, the holiday of Pentecost celebrates the Holy Spirit in the world. Medieval churches had “Holy Spirit holes” in the ceiling. On Pentecost, these holes would be opened. The people would let doves—another symbol of spirit—loose to fly around the ceiling and in and out of the spirit holes. Rose petals were dropped from the ceiling as choirboys drummed and made noises suggestive of the roaring wind.⁴ The open holes reminded people that the spirit isn’t to be found just inside the church, indeed cannot be kept in the church. It is everywhere. It’s in the sky or elsewhere.

And now, with this wonderful poem by Jane Kenyon that was our Reading today, I can add the swooping bat as another metaphorical snapshot of the spirit. The spirit is like the bat swooping around our house in circles—living room, kitchen, pantry, kitchen, living room... It’s everywhere.

That this symbol resonates with me is surprising because I am both fascinated and terrified by bats. I marvel at them—they are totally amazing creatures—and I am seriously afraid of them. Bats with six-foot wingspans in Sri Lanka totally freaked me out when I was there. In summer up in the North Winds, when the bats come out at dusk, you can count on me wearing a hat. I’ve been known to duck and, yes, even scream if they swoop a little too low. One nightfall a few years ago, I was sitting outside of our little place up north, warming myself by a fire as dusk fell. Suddenly my kids and their friends started screaming from inside our place. I looked in and, with horror, saw a bat flying around and around and around. Luckily my wife isn’t afraid of them and rushed inside to help shoo the bat out. Of course I remained outside, enjoying the whole spectacle from a safe distance.

I like Jane Kenyon’s bat image because the spirit—like bats—both fascinates and scares me. It is a little scary to think about the divine being all around and even within us—not scary in the mean old judgmental God thundering away at us, but scary in an awesome sort of way. Awe is a good kind of fear, a fear that is laced with reverence and wonder. It is the feeling I have when I contemplate how small my being and timeframe is compared to the immense universe of space and time. Awe is the feeling I have when I contemplate the miracle of evolution. It is the feeling I have when I held my children for the first time, acutely aware not only of the miracle of reproduction and birth, but also of the weighty responsibility of caring for a child. Kathleen Norris writes, “It is fear—in the old sense of awe—that allows us to recognize the holy in our midst, fear that gives us the

³ Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 125.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.

courage to listen, and to let God awaken in us the capacities and responsibilities we have been afraid to contemplate.”⁵

This is the kind of fear that Mary feels in the Christmas story in Luke’s Gospel when the angel Gabriel visits Mary:

The angel went in and said, ‘Greetings, most favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was deeply troubled by what he said and wondered what his greeting might mean. Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for God has been gracious to you; you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title “Son of the Most High” ...’ How can this be?’ said Mary; ‘I am still a virgin.’ The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy child to be born will be called “Son of God...”’ Here am I,” said Mary; ‘I am the Lord’s servant; as you have spoken, so be it.’ Then the angel left her.⁶

Of course, this story—or any of the other pictures of spirit—doesn’t totally capture what the spirit is. Such stories just hint at, offer glimpses of what the spirit is. The same is true with the medieval church’s Holy Spirit holes. The spirit cannot be domesticated. It cannot be fenced in.

The agnostic part of my theological self-label compels me to voice another possibility: that none of these images is on the mark because there is no such thing as the spirit or divinity. Without any hesitation or dismay, I recognize that this is a possibility too. So the spirit is in the sky or elsewhere—or maybe it’s nowhere at all.

What are some times I have experienced the spirit (if there is such a thing) whooshing by or within me? Well, just yesterday I felt it when I stared absent-mindedly out my office window and spied a cardinal hopping around by the pond. Cardinals are always amazing birds, but especially so when the snow starts falling and the contrast with the snow sets off the incredible beauty of their bright red color. I stared at that cardinal for quite some time, transfixed. The miracle of seasons and birds and color and seeing: it spoke of something deeper than just the bird’s bones and flesh and feathers.

I felt the spirit when I hiked down into the Grand Canyon last year. In that journey, I traveled from a distant overview on the canyon’s rim to the power of experiencing it from within. In a *New York Times* article a week ago, Henry Shukman writes about how his first visit to the Grand Canyon was a disappointment. After fighting summer traffic to get to the canyon, he stayed on the rim for a short time, unsuccessfully trying to absorb the magnitude of the panorama. He later returned—in the winter—and hiked down into the mystery of the canyon. He writes:

To experience the canyon, you have to leave the rim. The frustration aroused by the bigness, the grandness, on a rim-only visit becomes a liberation once you drop down. The modern world falls away. It’s not just a trip out of the human realm, but into the deep geology of the earth.

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), p. 144.

⁶ Luke 1:23-38 (New English translation).

Layer upon layer of the planet's crust is revealed, stratum by stratum: the Toroweap limestone, the Coconino sandstone, the Redwall limestone, the Tonto Group; the Vishnu schist deep down, close to two billion years old, nearly half the total age of the planet—the stuff that is under our very feet as we go about our lives is laid bare.⁷

And I felt the spirit moving last spring when I arrived late one night at the hospital to visit my mom. Her lungs squeezed by fluid built up around them, she was having trouble breathing. We hugged and whispered until from the other side of the curtain drawn 'round her bed, her roommate asked us to be quiet. After my mother stuck her tongue out at the roommate on the other side of the curtain, we held hands silently. It felt to me like something deeper was moving between and within us than the simple connection of hands.

In listening to Fellowship member Leslie Taylor talk about the experiences of her mother dying this past week, I thought about the spirit flowing within and around Leslie and her mother and the rest of their family. Everything in their family history and this past year of intense suffering by her mother pointed to the inevitability of a bad ending. But somehow, largely through the miracle of Hospice, her mother's story had a different ending. Her family experienced plenty of sorrow, of course, but also the joy of a dying full of meaning and, yes, even beauty. Instead of a wrenching last act, there was healing—including for Leslie's mother. There was even healing of some of the wounds from previous bad endings in her family. The physical result was exactly the same as past family experiences of dying—the death of a loved one—but somehow everything was completely different.

So how would I describe these experiences of the spirit? They are experiences of awe, wonder, and connectedness. They are moments of recognition that though our lives are tiny and our lifespans miniscule, we nevertheless are part of everything that is. Diana Eck calls such experiences of spirit “times of insight, recognition, and awareness.”⁸ And here's another thing about these experiences: they are generally quite intimate. The divine as spirit is an intimate picture of the divine. This is part of what I love about the symbol of the spirit.

Another way I'd describe experiences of the spirit is that they connect us with a deeper mystery, a mystery beyond all rationality and knowing. Now don't get me wrong: I believe in rationality with all of my heart. I never leave home without it. Rationality: “the kind of thing we do up north/in early winter, where the sun leaves for the day at 4:15,” the poet writes. But even with rationality always blessedly present, there is still plenty of room for mystery. I used to think that mystery was a human cop-out in the face of what we don't know. I believed that mystery was simply our lame explanation for all of the things that science couldn't yet explain. But now I realize that mystery has more to do with meaning than with scientific explanation. Even though science could someday theoretically allow us to understand how everything in the universe works, it cannot provide us with meaning on its own. Meaning lies in the realm of mystery. So like the late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, I came to the conclusion that “I had to clear a place for mystery on the altar of my hearth, which before I had crowded with

⁷ <http://travel.nytimes.com/2009/11/29/travel/29canyon.html>.

⁸ Eck, p. 121.

icons of knowledge.”⁹ The icons of knowledge are still there on the altar of my hearth, but now mystery is there, too.

The various celebrations of the Winter Solstice are a reminder to pay attention to the movements of the spirit within and around us. They speak of ancient mysteries that still are a real part of our lives. The pagan solstice traditions remind us that we live in a natural world that has powerful rhythms and seasons. Our lights and our buildings and our furnaces have not rid us of this reality. They also remind us of the power of beautiful darkness and the promise of the return of the light. The Christmas story reminds us that, as we hear each Christmas Eve in the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, “each night a child is born is a holy night, a time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping.”¹⁰ Hanukkah reminds us of the miracle of hope and faith, a miracle that cannot be extinguished.

These stories and traditions still speak to me. They’re not history. They’re not scientific explanation. They have to do with what it means to be human. For me, they have to do with what it means to be this particular human being—Roger Bertschausen—in this particular place and season. The challenge I face each December is to make room for these stories and traditions. It takes focus and intentionality to make sure they’re not drowned out by the shopping and the hustle and bustle and the canned Christmas carol muzak. I need to make sure I don’t miss them amidst the hustle and bustle of the season. Spirit and mystery will still be there anyway (I think), but it’s not the same (for me at least) if I don’t show up for the party.

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⁹ Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009—uncorrected proof copy), p. 126.

¹⁰ Reading #616 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).