A Quest to Know as We Are Known

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Introduction

For several years now, I have been deeply engaged in a spiritual quest. The magnitude of the changes in my understanding of the large questions (the What? and Why? of life) eclipses even the changes necessitated by my experience of classes in three years of Divinity School. This paper attempts to articulate (1) some of the causes and effects of this quest, (2) the current state of this quest and (3) where I perceive it trends.

As a Christian pastor, I feel threatened in some ways by this quest, as it has already taken me beyond the bounds of orthodox Christian dogma. The source of the threat does not lie in its jeopardizing my livelihood, or even my eternal destiny, but in jeopardizing the emotional and spiritual health of the many people who look to me for spiritual guidance and leadership. Personality surveys have identified in me a thirst for knowledge simply for the sake of pursuing knowledge. I recognize that most people are not like me in this way, and experience the movement of deep theological and philosophical foundations as threatening by definition, regardless of where the movement leads.

The quest excites me; it feeds a deep hunger within me to explore the nature of reality – perhaps in search of Truth – but definitely in search of coherence. I am willing to follow where the promise of Truth through exploration leads, even as I recognize the necessity of discretion regarding the experimental nature of this quest. Perhaps I will be able to attain a level of clarity and coherence that I can communicate to others, but I must confess at this stage my personal priority of the quest itself rather than the ability to communicate whatever I learn to others (this paper notwithstanding).

Bits and pieces find their way into my conversation with friends and companions who are sympathetic to this journey. My personality gravitates toward learning by expressing my newfound understandings to others. Yet I am far more threatened on this journey by other people's aversion to breaking new ground beyond the boundaries of dogmatic (religious and secular) understanding than the possibility of failure to find clarity in this quest – that I might destroy my faith foundation and have no place to stand.

Perhaps this fear and its attendant realities are the subject of another paper. I mention it here because my understanding of this fear (real or imagined) has forced me to live out much of this quest in isolation. I harbor no illusions that anyone will embrace what I have to say when (if?) I reach a place of sufficient cohesion and clarity to share what I have learned with them. I am not a skeptic, but I am a realist. I have written before that I seek not so much a place to stand as a position to assume while falling. I'd far rather probe deeper along a vein than to consolidate and establish a stable position. So I probe alone.

Here's a bit of irony: Unity stands as the theme of this quest. Yet, if I have learned anything from following the Way of Jesus, it is the inevitable link between prophecy and punishment (in the home country, among your "own"). So I will seek a greater understanding of Unity and Truth, but I have no illusions that whatever I learn will be welcomed in my culture. My hope is that other explorers on this Quest will find an oasis in the desert, where one day an ocean will surge.

Part 1: The Precipitating Causes of this Quest

My experience as a son, brother, husband, father (biological and foster), friend, and pastor have brought me to this journey. Certainly my experience as a Christian has led me to this process. The church (the people, living and dead) inspires and discourages me – and has both prompted and prohibited this kind of search for understanding. My experience must be my point of reference, regardless of whether or not is it sufficiently "objective". To combat this myopic handicap, I read as widely and as avidly as time allows.

1. My brother, Jack, was born severely mentally and physically retarded, and lived with my family as I grew up.
2. I have experienced and witnessed both nurture and abuse, miraculous and mundane in church communities as a child and as an adult.
3. While in the Navy, I traveled to foreign countries and witnessed crushing poverty on a scale I had not imagined, as well as vibrant, diverse cultures both similar and vastly different from my own.
4. At Divinity School, my understanding of scripture and church history expanded to embrace a wider, far more complex perspective than that I had grown up with the previous 27 years.
5. As a pastor, the way I live out my faith, particularly in relationship to others, has more often than not made me an enemy of the church (and I have come to realize that this reality is not inconsistent with the experience of other religious leaders, notably Jesus).
6. In my reading and experience, I have resonated with Truth that has transcended the boundaries of the Church – I have also become increasingly uncomfortable with the energy the church expends to conserve its traditions at the expense of seeking the Truth.
7. As a pastor, I have been humbled by my inability to heal the people I serve and whom I have come to love. Often, the most profound gift that I give to them is the freedom to speak the truth, often but not always in contradiction of the traditions and dogma that have brought us together (and that keep us together)
8. After exploring many alternatives to religion in general and Christianity in particular, I am deeply skeptical of any philosophy that does not wrestle with the realities and truths of religious understanding – these include a sense of awe and wonder for creation, and a sense of unity and purpose of creation and humanity
9. I am a lover and lifelong student of language, symbol and story. I appreciate the way in which poetic rather than prosaic expresses Truth, and the ways in which the myth of objectivity is both elusive and illusory. I learn by expression and the struggle for coherence and articulation.
10. Throughout my 45-year sojourn on earth, I have been mystified by the ways I bless and curse others and myself by my actions and reactions (as well as the ways others bless and curse me). Grace, forgiveness and hope are so intricately and necessarily woven into the fabric of my life and relationships, I could not live without them.
11. I am a descendent of Hebrews, Christians, Protestant and Methodist reformers, who agonizingly but necessarily broke with tradition in order to follow after the Truth of God and to share it.

As I review this list, I am struck by the many tensions: blessings and curses, fact and fiction, unity and diversity, tradition and innovation, preservation and reform, sacred and secular, giftedness and incapacity. Life in this tension teaches me that the tension itself may be a necessary component of life. False resolutions may give the illusion of peace, but they lead more often than not to the unbearable tension of living a lie. Living in this tension has led me in the past to express a desire to "assume a comfortable position while falling". I hope to continue to resist the very real temptation to succumb to a kind of mental paralysis necessary for this false peace by consciously choosing to live in the tension. My hope is the recognition that I have a choice, and that choosing to live in the tension will inevitably lead not only to greater understanding, but to choices consistent with Truth (and perhaps even with love).

So part of the fear I experience in this quest is my experience of increasing tension as my greater understanding leads not to resolution of the tension but to clarification of the necessity and cause of the tension and how many supposed resolutions prove false. The fear itself is balanced by freedom from false resolution strategies of judgment and hypocrisy, and a wider appreciation of all aspects of creation as unity and complimentary rather than in opposition.

Part 2: Where I Find Myself in the Quest

God-ness as Unity

The short version of where I find myself in this quest involves my understanding that "God" is a way of expressing what we mean by the experience and reality of unity in all created things, and among all people. The Gospel of John, that latest of the four canonical gospels, suggests this understanding of unity as follows: "In that day you will know that *I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you*" (John 14:20 NAU). The Christian Apostle Paul articulated this principle of unity in a letter to the church in Rome generations earlier: "We know that *God causes all things to work together for good* to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28 NAU).

Because the traditional anthropocentric metaphors for this unity obscure rather than convey its reality for me, I have become increasingly more comfortable with the working title "God-ness" as a way of expressing what I am coming to appreciate more and more in this quest (the capital G is both a bow to my tradition as well as a way of expressing this profound reality). The unspeakable and untranslatable divine appellation (surely it is not a name) for this reality in my Jewish heritage (YHWH) comes closest to expressing this reality in the tradition my ancestors have handed down to me.

Though I embrace the Way of Jesus, it's confusion of the reality that is God with masculine pronouns, and with dogmatic formulations of the Trinity (particularly the implications that inevitably flow from the confusion of Jesus and "the Father", in which any real sense of either is lost) plants in me a desire to bear witness to the Truth in ways that call into question (or at least critically examine) many dogmatic Christian understandings of God. Though Jesus was certainly an incarnational reality, our experience of God (as part of God) transcends and reconceives reality and our experience of reality. Perhaps this is what Christianity attempts to convey through the phrase "Kingdom of God/Heaven".

The concept of God-ness preserves for me the tension of God's unutterable Otherness as well as God's profound unity with all creation. God-ness takes seriously God's omnipresence while bearing witness to our participation in (and experience of) God, within any scale of perspective. I am well aware that rejecting anthropocentric metaphors for God dehumanizes God in some ways (more about this on page 7). But I believe that humanizing God (metaphorically speaking) was only one method of relating to God, rather than honestly testifying to the reality of God. And for me, God-ness as a metaphor rather than a title/name opens a wealth of possibilities in relating to God in all of existence (I will not say they are new ways of relating, because people have used them in and beyond world religions throughout human history).

The Relationship between God-ness and Human Desire (Did we create God?)

The question of relating to God-ness exposes another tension concerning the origins of the idea of God. Did humanity create God from a deep desire for order in a chaotic world? I certainly believe that humanity created the many ways of *expressing* the reality and experience of unity in all things that exist. Because we are human, our ways of exploring and communicating this reality will necessarily be limited and shaped by our perception (as well as by our desires). In speaking of God, we give expression not only to that which we experience, but also to that which we hope to experience.

There will always be a tension (I might also mention a profound *relationship*) between reality and desire in our God-talk, which gives expression both to unity of the human experience and also to the meaning of the human experience. Perhaps the greatest tension of all lies in our experience that created things adhere to immutable laws of behavior, while created beings do not. The chaos we experience lies in ourselves, and escaping this chaos would lead to a binding of human will worse than death. And God-talk must account for this tension between order and chaos, inevitability and possibility. We abhor random chance, even as we cannot imagine living without it, so we conceive of a God who would *encompass* our freedom within a boundary of justice, provision and meaning.

The name we give to this boundary zone defines the "Good", the divine Law, or perhaps even Love. The power to enforce it is God's greatness. Here is another tension: the goodness and greatness of God. From a human perspective (the only one possible for us), either attribute suffers as we experience more of the other. Inevitably, our powerful desire to be free of the tension between order and chaos so distorts our concept of God that we create gods who conform to our desire (however altruistic) rather than to our experience.

In human experience, for instance, God provides rain (or refuses to provide rain) on the righteous as well as the unrighteous. This violates our sense of justice. Yet justice itself must be tempered with mercy for the human race to preserve hope. This very quality of mercy renders useless any concept of cause and effect with regard to human actions (good or bad), and leaves us wallowing in (well-intentioned) chaos. God complicates this chaos by refusing to intervene in human affairs in any demonstrable or consistent way, either to reward good behavior or to punish bad behavior, leaving humans to articulate laws and enforce consequences designed to regulate human behavior.

Ironically, we discover a pattern and provision not in the order we crave, but in the many departures and mutations from this order, in both the natural and behavioral realms. And while God-ness refuses to conform to any laws we articulate, the serendipitous and surprising theophanies that we experience precisely in the realm of chaos and coincidence inspire and amaze us in ways that give us *new* desires. Rare but persistent DNA coding mutations make life and adaptation to change possible, as does the timing and composition of the formation of our solar system, including the catastrophic collision that formed earth's moon. The confounding irregularities of (our own) human behavior make possible profoundly beautiful relationships. Humans and creation respond innovatively and creatively to threats and challenges in ways that would be impossible in times of relative comfort. We learn to give thanks in all things and perceive a divine plan in the apparent coincidences of life beyond our understanding.

The idea of a plan or design is itself anthropocentric. God as Clockmaker soothes our fears of randomness and reinforces the human delusion that we have the power to control our lives and our environment. The idea of God nurtured and refined in the Christian Church asserts that God's will expresses itself throughout creation by design – explaining all apparent coincidence and freeing us from chaos. We have purpose and meaning because God intended and designed us with a purpose in mind. Yet all religions struggle to explain why in all of creation, humans refuse to conform to any conception of a divine will and plan. And they struggle in vain.

Any theology must account for the way in which we (humans) can know and do the "Good" and recognize and avoid the "Bad". The "Good" includes but goes beyond what we call ethical behavior, because the Good symbolizes all that a deity intends or wills for and through creation. So creation is the original expression of divine will, and the Good is the end or purpose of creation. Before even considering "the Bad" and how to deal with it in this conception, I find it intriguing to see just how much this system reflects not a divine perspective but a human one.

If God has no end and no beginning, why do our various theological systems refuse to even contemplate the vast expanse of God's being that necessarily encompasses (engulfs) the miniscule span of time from creation to the end of creation? Why, in the first Genesis account, does this vast consideration find expression only in the phrase "And the Spirit (*ruach*) of God (*Elohim*) moved upon the face of the waters (Gen 1:1 KJV)? Why, for instance, do we translate the opening line, "In the beginning…" rather than "In *our* beginning…"? (The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation renders this phrase: "When God began to create heaven and earth…" (Gen 1:1 TNK).)

The God-ness Beyond Our Questions: The Story of Job

In this quest, I am struggling to come to terms with God-ness that transcends the questions that plague me about human existence. Just as our ancestors during the Copernican Revolution opened their comprehension to a universe impossibly larger than the one previously conceived by humanity, I want to expand my comprehension to perceive the Truth of God-ness in but also beyond creation, space and time, a reality about which present theology only tantalizingly hints. Such a conception of God perceives humanity, and all of creation, as an expression of the Divine, rather than the other way around. This Theology of the Quest takes seriously the Hebrew assertion that humanity bears the indelible stamp of

the Divine image, while recognizing the limits of that powerful metaphor in comprehending the Divine nature and reality.

Perhaps the oldest story in the Hebrew scriptures, far older than the story of origins, is the story of Job, a human pawn in a cosmic drama. The experience of tragic, inexplicable loss gave birth to this oldest tale, which utterly rejects pathetic religious attempts to justify the random brutality of life as conforming to some (divine?) pattern of justice and rationality. Job's unnamed wife taunts him to curse God and die. His friends encourage him to search for a reason in his behavior for this divine punishment. The listener/reader knows, however, that the wife has offered Job the more accurate assessment – the misery inflicted on Job's family and his body merely satisfies the curiosity of the heavenly host (nothing like the Devil is involved here) concerning the strength of Job's devotion to God.

Throughout the tale, Job begs to plead his case before God. And when, at the story's end, God thunders forth, Job is speechless before the awesome nature of the Divine, who will not deign to explain either the nature of God or the nature of life. A story that begins with the Zatan's (Adversary's) mocking question, "Does Job (humanity) fear God for nothing? (Job 1:9 NAS) ends with the Divine taunt, "Who is this who obscures counsel without knowledge? (Job 42:3 TNK), and ultimately asserts humanity's self-absorption and divinity's inscrutability.

Job's Tale ponders why God would care about humanity and why we would care about God, if the relationship does not result in some kind of blessing or reward. How and why are we humans related to God (or to each other, for that matter) if not by some cosmic quid pro quo? In answering these questions, the story makes several implicit assumptions about the character of the Divine-Human relationship. The first is one of profound separation between God and humanity, and the necessity of a mediator (in this case, a cynical Adversary – of God and perhaps humanity). The second is the limiting of the possibility of a theophany to natural disasters (an assumption we continue to make in our definition of such disasters – and of nothing else - as "Acts of God").

Implicit in these assumptions is the deep desire of both the Divine and humanity for a relationship, in spite of these formidable barriers. Both God and Job expend energy to relate to one another, regardless of the difficulty or the consequences. The tale of Job does not attempt to explain this desire, other than to reject the false conception that human striving for God (to "see God", as Job puts it in 42:5) has anything to do with external motivations of reward or punishment, or perhaps even with human conceptions of justice or rationality. Seen in this rigorous light, Job is a quest for reunion.

Jewish thought at the time did not include a conception of the afterlife, except as eternal sleep in Sheol (the underworld – where bodies were buried – not the Hell/Gehenna of much later Greek thought). The life of human experience was all they knew, and salvation was bound up in the relationship a human being could experience with the divine, through worship/sacrifice, living by the Torah/Law, and prayer/praise. They found meaning beyond their lives in their identity as the children of Yisra-El (literally: *wrestlers*-with-God), with whom God related in order to invite all people on earth to experience the blessing of a life of relationship with the Divine.

One of the oldest Christian catechetical responses was the assertion that humanity has been created by God for relationship with God. Perhaps any experience of relatedness, of connection or of unity, involves an experience of the Divine – of God-ness – whether we experience that relatedness with created beings or created things. Cosmologists assert that all matter in our universe once shared an inconceivable unity before inflating and then expanding across an equally inconceivable expanse of space and time. Quantum physicists have observed the inexplicable connection between particles, regardless of the space that separates them, once they have interacted with each other.

Human empathy manifests as a physical as well as an emotional reality in the human brain, blurring the lines that separate "self" and "other" in ways that call into question those very categories. In my present quest, I begin to wonder whether or not "God" is the name we give to this experience of Unity in and with creation (and to the reality of Unity beyond anything we can experience). If so, then what we mean by the notion of "God" is a symbol for our true home, the place where we belong. God is our source and our end, but also the Way that connects our origin and purpose. The Christian Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, God is "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28 NAS), and defined the church as the "body" in his letter to the church at Ephesus, which Paul further defined as "the *fulness* of Him *who fills all in all*" (Eph 1:23 NAS).

The God-ness Beyond the Idolatry of Metaphor

All religious inquiry and experience struggles not only to know this Unity with the divine (and with all of creation), which is perhaps the experience of the divine itself, but also to express this knowledge in ways that do not destroy the possibility of unity. The struggle, it seems to me, results not merely from inevitable narrow sectarian or cultural perspective, but also from the limits inherent in the process of articulating coherent ideas about Unity or the ways in which humans might engender Unity. We can only employ the symbolic language of metaphor when giving expression to this concept of Unity, and religion repeatedly succumbs to the temptation to conflate the metaphor with the reality we are attempting to express. This temptation is especially powerful when we attempt to name this Unity (as when we use a term/title like "God").

The curse of any metaphor for this divine reality (and yes, "divine reality" is yet another metaphor) is that all metaphors inevitably break down. Metaphors describe or symbolize an aspect of reality *from a given perspective*, and may communicate a great deal more about the *perspective* than the reality itself. When we speak of this experience of Unity, for instance, as when we employ another inanimate metaphor for this reality such as "Higher Power", those of us who have grown accustomed to anthropocentric metaphors and symbols for this reality will resist inanimate symbols almost without thinking about why we resist them, simply because they seem to *dehumanize* God.

But whatever we mean to communicate by using the symbol-title "God", it cannot *by definition* be human, even though it (what a problematic pronoun made more problematic by the careless substitution of the masculine singular pronoun!) necessarily relates to humanity (or is the source of all relationship). I say "by definition" because any conception of Unity must transcend the bounds of what we narrowly (and perhaps erroneously) define as Self or personality. To attempt to describe the ways in

which humans experience Unity can never fully comprehend or define what we mean by Unity. God-ness must inevitably be Other than what we can know or express, utterly beyond comprehension, even as we experience (or perhaps even give expression to) the reality of God-ness or Unity.

So while I can affirm that Unity has a nature (possible to communicate in part but never in whole), I fear that asserting that God has a personality (and can be known or comprehended) irrevocably obscures the reality of God-ness, and even the very real possibility of experiencing Unity as a human being. Our language itself presents an almost insurmountable barrier to communicating this reality – and words or titles like divine being, God/god, my clunky God-ness, or abstract concepts such as Unity, Ground/Source of All Being, One, All in All, or Higher Power, will not only fall short, they also necessitate a kind of translation process in order to separate the symbol baggage from the reality we are trying to convey by reaching for any given symbol.

Not only do symbols obscure as well as communicate the reality they symbolize, the tradition of religious understanding has privileged certain symbols (such as the title, God, or Godhead/Trinity the "place" of Heaven, atonement and salvation, Kingdom, People/Children of God, and perhaps most profoundly, Church and Sacred/Holy) in a way that *conceals* the way they distort. This concealment is why religious adherents (like myself) so easily confuse the symbol for the reality, a condition the Jews call idolatry.

This convoluted conversation about the nature of language and metaphor sheds light on why this quest I am experiencing generates so much fear and confusion. And also why I believe it is so crucially important. Until we recognize the illusory nature of metaphor, we will continue to blindly mistake a paucity of symbols (we need far more, not less) for the profound reality we are trying to convey by using them. And what is worse, our knee-jerk defense of these symbols as reality will prevent us from having any creative dialogue about the experience and the reality of what the title "God" represents for many of us.

God-ness and Jesus (The Man and the Metaphor/Movement)

As a Christian pastor, I must account for the role Jesus plays in this conception of God-ness. For the purposes of this conversation about metaphors and the reality they represent, the concept of "Jesus the Christ/Messiah" illustrates powerfully the ways in which metaphor both communicates and participates in reality. Christians make a distinction between the itinerant Rabbi Joshua Ben Joseph from Nazareth and the risen Jesus the Christ, who was a powerful presence that the Christian Apostle Paul experienced not in the flesh but as a spiritual reality (see Acts 9 and 1 Corinthians 15:8). ("Jesus" is the Greek transliteration of his Hebrew name: Yeshuach, which is itself transliterated into the English name "Joshua".) In the Gospel chronicles, the *teachings* of the Rabbi whom his followers recognized as the Anointed One of God were of far more importance than the story of his earthly life (almost all of which they ignore).

It may be fair to say that the sayings of this man who came to be symbolized as the Logos/Word of God communicated for the followers of his Way the reality of God's presence and promise in a way that the physical (human) presence of Joshua Ben Joseph could not. After his execution, his followers uttered

prayers not only in the manner in which he had taught them, but also "in his name", just as they gathered "in his name". Scholars and theologians debate to this day whether or not the Rabbi named Joshua ever claimed to be the Messiah of God. But for his followers, many of whom literally conflate his spiritual presence with the presence of God, the metaphorical reality of Jesus the Christ both profoundly obscures the "real" or "historical" Jesus and communicates/participates in Truths about the nature and experience of God-ness that far outstrip anything he might have taught in his lifetime, even as they take inspiration from these sayings.

It goes without saying that followers of Jesus in almost every age and time have encountered the idea or concept of Jesus the Messiah/Christ metaphorically (to say "spiritually" is another way of expressing the same thing) in a way that his band of followers during his life did not and could not, and vice versa. Early followers of the Way eagerly anticipated his return following his death. As the generations passed, however, the gap between the man and the movement widened until his teachings threatened the authority and existence of the Church, as Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously articulated in *The Brothers Karamozov* (in the chapter entitled, "The Grand Inquisitor").

Yet in a very real sense, Jesus does return when anyone understands their encounter with God-ness through his sayings, teachings, and Way. The metaphor of Jesus the Christ both communicates and participates in the reality of an encounter with God-ness in a way that both touches and transcends the Rabbi Joshua Ben Joseph. That Rabbi, because of the Way he lived and the Way he died, symbolized and symbolizes still a profound Way of encountering God-ness in daily life (and in death), through the way his followers remember, experience and interpret his life, teachings and death.

Among the many tensions I have mentioned above, I struggle between deconstruction and creativity. Tension itself expresses the bittersweet and transformative quality of Unity. I struggle with the Christian Church not because it represents a fallacy, but because we have not done justice to the God we claim to worship. The reality looms behind and through the symbols with which we have grown complacent. These symbols can blind us not only to further explore the reality but even to experience it. We are not hypocrites; the Reality to which we bear witness confounds our ability to name it.

Three Stories to Convey Unity or God-ness

1. ***The Leaves and the Mushrooms***

For the past five years, every Fall and Spring, I have enjoyed several days of reflection and meditation while camping and hiking in various state parks and forests near our home. I began calling them Prayer Retreats, and the name stuck, even though it doesn't adequately describe what happens during this time away. During one retreat in October of 2006, I stopped to ponder a spread of mushrooms while walking around a pond in the late afternoon. Their bright orange coloring drew my attention to them, and as I knelt down to get a closer look, I noticed the tint of the orange of the mushrooms perfectly matched the orange tint of the leaves scattered on the forest floor surrounding the mushrooms.

As I drank in the rich bright orange color carpeting the ground near my feet, the staggering beauty and symmetry overwhelmed me, and suddenly I began to weep. Throughout my life, my tears have served

as a signal of significance in my life – calling me to pay careful attention to the moment. My body seems to know before my mind understands that I am witnessing a moment of deep understanding – and the tears call my mind to follow and explore the moment more deeply.

Returning to that moment as I write, I remember being swallowed up in the beauty and simplicity of my surroundings, and feeling awestruck by the complexity of a world where a field of mushrooms and the fallen, dying leaves scattered among them could be painted with such identical tints of dazzling orange. The transitory, fragile nature of all of this momentary beauty gave to everything a priceless value. This experience gives a hint at the constellation of meaning attached to Unity or God-ness: beauty, symmetry, relatedness, awe, gratitude, and both transitory and eternal. These moments proliferate in our lives, our world, and our universe – for those who have (as the Christians echo one of the sayings of the Teacher) "eyes to see."

2. The Last Shall be First

As I grew up, I became increasingly frustrated with my mentally challenged brother, Jack. As the oldest son, my parents expected me to look after him at times, and held me responsible for the messes he made when I failed to keep a close eye on him while they were gone. The Fall I began high school, I accidentally pushed him down a set of stairs in our split level and he fell and broke his toe. To prevent Jack from tearing off the cast, the doctor casted Jack's entire leg – and I felt a deep shame about the accident that resulted from my frustration.

Ironically, I broke my wrist playing football and had to have my arm casted while Jack was recovering, so we were both casted for several weeks together. One of my greatest frustrations with my brother, Jack, was that we could not communicate with each other because of his mental disability. So I could never tell him that I was sorry or hear him forgive me. One day we were alone together with our casts, and after we walked in the woods behind our home and back (something we rarely did), we returned to the house and I talked to Jack as if he could understand me.

I told Jack that I understood that after our deaths, we would switch places, because the Bible promised that the first would be last and the last would be first in an afterlife the church called Heaven. As we sat across from each other on the floor, I apologized for hurting him and asked Jack to forgive me. I also told him that I was happy that we would trade places someday, and hoped that he would treat me with kindness and grace when he was first and I was last, as I would endeavor to do in the future. When I finished, I looked up and saw Jack do something I've rarely seen him do before or since that moment: my brother Jack was crying.

One of the ways that forgiveness "works" involves the way it redeems the mistake by weaving it into a chain of causality of a blessing which could not have been possible without the mistake. Religious persons even express this riddle as a manifestation of some divine plan (e.g., "God *intended* for me to sin in order for this new possibility to emerge"). Unity encompasses such considerations by drawing all choices and probabilities into a web of inter-relatedness that exposes as hopelessly limited any perspective from which we attempt to judge those choices (even as we aspire to make "better" choices).

From this vantage point, the distance between Last and First shrinks to insignificance. Unity expresses itself in tears that bind two brothers separated by a gulf of disability – tears that bestow forgiveness and love. Jack's tears once showed me that we were far more alike than we were different, more profoundly connected than separated by our different abilities. From that day, Jack and I forged a different kind of relationship marked by a profound mutual respect that gives love a foundation to grow. I experience this love between us as God-ness, as Unity.

3. Uncommon Bonds Underground

When I attended the Naval Academy in the early to mid-1980's, an author and former infantry officer named Frederick Downs, Jr. spoke with our history class about his book, *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War.* He had lost and arm and a leg in a mine explosion during his tour as a junior officer in that war, and gestured during his talk with a prosthesis that had a hook on the end where his hand had once been. Downs had been a platoon leader, but had also been called on to serve as one of the "tunnel rats" who was sent down to investigate any Viet Cong cave fortifications his platoon encountered.

The tunnel systems, Downs told us, were like a world entirely separate from the world above ground. Downs experienced the threat of danger there (although he was injured in a mine explosion on the surface), but he also told us that he experienced a bond between himself and the other soldiers who inhabited the caves. This bond transcended the apparent boundaries of nationality, culture, and identification as combatants – and made possible a most unlikely kind of empathy.

Downs told us a story of a time he explored a tunnel system that had been apparently abandoned a short time before his platoon discovered it. He was looking for intelligence before setting explosives to destroy the tunnel. Just before initiating the timer for the explosives, he sensed the presence of a Viet Cong soldier in the tunnel with him. But that presence did not threaten Downs – it triggered an empathetic reaction to fear for the person's life (because of the explosives). So Downs shouted "get out" in Vietnamese before initiating the timer and climbing out to the surface himself.

I was awestruck by this confession by a man who might have had every right to allow himself to be consumed by the need to dehumanize as "enemy" a people who were responsible for his lifelong injury and loss. That he made this confession gave it a kind of gravity for me that demanded my attention. The story called into question the ways we categorize and cordon off members of the human community from each other, and opened the possibility that we might be related to each other in ways that obliterate the illusory lines of demarcation we typically draw to separate and segregate ourselves from each other.

Downs' story also powerfully illustrates for me the drawing power of what I am calling God-ness or Unity, in spite of apparently insurmountable barriers. That this Unity persists in even the harshest environments testifies to its reality in all situations, as well as to its irresistible power. We find ourselves drawn by this reality of Unity in a way that transcends and re-shapes our passions, desires and fears. The Gospel of John attributes to the Rabbi Joshua Ben Joseph a definition of this Unity as Peace – a peace beyond human understanding, which transcends even the boundaries of our world.

What are the ramifications of this encounter with God-ness?

Humility and Creativity in seeking the Truth of Unity

The clunky language of this essay demonstrates one of the most pervasive results of this thought process: it exposes the limits of language itself for understanding and communication. If we take these barriers seriously, our language about God-ness will necessarily become more halting and humble – but it will also become far more creative and agile. The limits of language (especially of God-language) catalyzed this quest because of the paucity of symbol-language we employ to communicate God-encounters, and because of the way in which repeated use of limited symbols inevitably threatens to obscure the reality which they were originally intended to convey.

My hope is for an explosion of language and metaphor (of stories like the three above) in the ways we humans describe our encounters with and participation in God-ness. Of course we will experience disorientation as we experiment with new (strange) metaphors. But we will also discover not only new ways to communicate our experience of God-ness and Unity; we will discover new meanings and even new metaphors in the treasury of our various religious traditions and scriptures.

This tension between humility and creativity will manifest in every aspect of theology, sociology and ecclesiology. For instance, my use of the plural forms in the final sentence of the paragraph preceding this one begs a freighted question about the relationship between Truth and the proliferation of religious identity and understanding in our world. Perhaps every religious system must lay claim to the Truth through the power of Revelation (certainly Christianity does). Yet such claims do not necessarily have to be exclusive claims. The Christian tradition itself embraces and is founded on an understanding of God communicated in the Jewish tradition, even as it seems to undermine many truth claims of Judaism. Islam recognizes its relationship with both Jewish and Christian traditions in the stories of Abraham and of Jesus, while it integrates those stories into its own stories in ways that call into question both Jewish and Christian ways of understanding YHWH, God and Allah.

Rather than searching for some mystical lowest common denominator in world religions, this humility-creativity tension would release us from the blinding force of apologetics and defense in our encounters with adherents of religious traditions different from our own, and reveal a world of meaning in which we could encounter new understandings of God-ness by both speaking and listening – not in debate but in dialogue characterized by curiosity and mutual respect. In this dialogue, every religious adherent would be empowered to bear witness to their own tradition (as opposed to being silenced or attacked). My hope (prayer?) lies in the explosion of creative potential and wisdom made accessible by this kind of world conversation.

Ghandi famously asserted that if Christians in India followed the teachings of Christ, all of India would convert to Christianity. This was no Hindu attack on Christianity, but an encouragement for Christians to live the powerful Truths inherent in Christianity – not necessarily to convert all Hindu adherents in India, but to love them as Christ teaches and enables his followers to love. Martin Luther King, Jr. sat at Ghandi's feet and learned from his method of non-violent resistance to return to the American south and to use this Hindu lesson in order to call all Christians to live *more* faithfully as followers of Jesus.

Similarly, when Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, scholar, and peace activist (whom the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967), extends an invitation to live beyond the illusions of permanence and annihilation and bow in reverence to my biological and spiritual ancestors, my homeland, the people I love, and the people who have made me suffer, I experience two reactions. The first reaction is an appreciation of the Truth inherent in Christianity that is reinforced by this Buddhist teaching. The second is an appreciation of the new ways (for me) in which this Buddhist practice enables me to understand Truth.

Neither of these encounters necessitates my abandonment of the Christian tradition and practice – but both of them expand my understanding of Truth and of Christianity. I am humbled and awed by the gifts of wisdom and perspective these encounters give to me – and reminded to always be mindful of this perspective as I make Truth claims from my own Christian perspective. Yet these encounters excite and encourage me to celebrate the profound nature of Truth to reveal its unity in the diversity of human understanding and experience – a unity that both confirms and expands my understanding of the Christian tradition.

The Ethics of Unity/Community Transcend Judgment and Transform Life

The concept of Unity could potentially expand our understanding and practice of Christian ethics more profoundly (from a human perspective) than perhaps any other area of focus in the Christian tradition. By ethics, I mean the understanding and practice of Good behavior and the ways in which we respond to Bad behavior in ourselves and in others. I include in this consideration behavior manifested in our minds and in our bodies.

At an interfaith dialogue eight years ago, in the wake of the 9-11 attacks in America, a Jewish Rabbi condensed the Jewish faith into the statement: “the Law is Love”. He was followed by an Islamic Imam who summed up the Muslim faith as a daily recognition that humans would have to give an account for all of our actions on the Day of Judgment and face either punishment or reward. Setting aside the question of how representative either account is of its respective religious tradition, both of these accounts assume that humans are inherently bad and that we require an external motivation to choose the good in our daily life.

Many Christians understand ethics essentially as a battle to tame the human spirit, which they assume to be inherently bad. This foundational understanding of the ethical dilemma leads to several related methods of conducting this battle. The foundational principle, which Christians inherit from our Jewish forebears, is an understanding of Revelation and Truth as Law, as opposed to human understanding, which Christians locate in the canon of Jewish and Christian scriptures. Though Christians temper the Jewish Law by the precepts in the Gospels and Epistles of our New Testament, this understanding of the Christian tradition leaves the authority of the Law (God’s Law) essentially unquestioned.

Christianity contributes to these monotheistic conceptions of ethical authority and revelation an interpretation of Jesus’ execution by Rome as the only way humans could endure the punishment justice demands we receive for our failure to obey the law (which is inevitable). We call this Grace.

While Grace appears to break the curse of punishment (at least for "true" believers), it leaves unquestioned the basic assumption of an adversarial ethical understanding that judges humans as bad by definition. Yet its presumption of Divine Love that trumps our concept of Justice with mercy opens the way for further examination of the ways in which an understanding of God-ness as Unity might create an entirely transformative ethics. If we can bear the tension of undermining God's justice while preserving a sense of God's goodness, we create the possibility of a new understanding of justice, judgment, and perhaps even of goodness – in the context of Unity.

The Grace and Mercy of God-ness, apparently motivated by Love, radically calls into question all judgments of good and bad we could possibly make, by reorienting our perspective to affirm the Unity of all things and all behavior choices. This excruciating transition parallels in many ways the release from the delusion of control and appreciation of God-ness in apparent chaos in nearly every aspect of our natural world. Just as genetic mutation, for instance, occurs in the context of adaptation and evolution, on which all life depends, so too our behavioral "choices" take place in a larger arena of ancestry, culture, history, and environment that determine many (perhaps not all) of these choices in ways that mock our attempts to judge or to label them.

To take a simple but instructive example, Judas' betrayal of Jesus becomes a crucial component of the story not of crucifixion but of salvation that extends far beyond the boundaries even of Judas' earthly life. In fact, his story recalls the ways in which the Jews attributed the Pharoah's refusal to release the Hebrews from slavery as a part of the Divine plan of Exodus. If God deliberately "hardens" the hearts of players in the Divine drama, how can anyone be held responsible for their actions, or judged as bad for playing the part God ordained for them to play?

Once again, I set aside discussion about whether or not these stories and interpretations accurately represent God-ness or not. The point is that they give expression to the human experience of what poets and playwrights have called Destiny or Fate, when contemplating ethical or moral behavior. Unity does not negate the very real consequences of human choices and behaviors, some of which cause pain and sadness, and some of which cause joy and happiness. Unity restores a sense of humility regarding not only the choices we make, but also the choices others make – in the context of a deep respect and awe for a perspective that recognizes the power of Unity to absorb every choice we could possibly make, even as it inspires us to see our choices as an expression of this timeless Unity – of God-ness.

Understanding God-ness as Unity holds out the possibility that we might live with dignity, creativity and grace, for ourselves and for our neighbor. Unity calls us to recognize a connection that both transcends and transforms our choices, as well as the ways we perceive the choices of others. Again, it seems to me that this comprehension of Unity inspired Jesus to speak of the "Kingdom of Heaven" as a drawing-near reality, which contemporary theologian Dallas Willard defines as "that place where God's will is perfectly done."

In a world of Unity, God-ness cannot be thwarted. Forgiveness is not only possible in such a world – it constantly reshapes our understanding of human behavior (our own as well as others') and inspires us to live more consciously and joyfully in this Unity and purpose. What God is doing – we are doing.

Life Eternal – Why are We Here?

Having considered the impact of Unity on our understanding of Truth and Ethics, I bring this essay to a conclusion by considering the impact of Unity on the Meaning or Purpose of Life. The Buddhist teaching I mentioned earlier rejected both permanence and annihilation (non-continuation) as false notions we should surrender in order to know Truth. When we come to grips with the confounding transitory nature of our lives, of whatever we mean by "Self", the existential escape of annihilation almost seems comforting in the release it promises from the tension of being pulled beyond the boundaries of ourselves… because we have no idea of what another alternative might be.

I suggest that Unity gives us a way to understand ourselves as both Self and in communion with God-ness and all of Creation – and even to understand the notion of Self as the figurative tip of an iceberg of identity that is but another expression of this communion – this community. What we call "Love" symbolizes the way we experience and express this communion. I have been recently delighted to learn that our human bodies are composed of stardust – material formed in the nuclear furnaces of impossibly distant stars and flung across light years of space to form the raw material of our bodies (in *The View From the center of the Universe* by Joel R.Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams). God-ness invites us to celebrate this communion with all that exists as a kind of homecoming.

Unity calls us to recognize ourselves as members of each other, to borrow from a rich Christian metaphor, both for Christ and for his followers. Unity restores a miraculous sense of time in each precious moment of our present – in a dance with the constantly changing mystery of past and future. In this miracle lies the heart of what we might call eternity, which we can experience through gratitude and joy. God-ness calls us to live abundantly and free – in communion with All in all.

Unity subsumes our inconsequential "Why?" into an eternal ocean of wonder and awe at the incomprehensible nature of "What?" We could experience each moment as the miraculous eternal, in which our lives express and participate in the blessing of God-ness, the Unity that continually inspires and amazes us with boundless joy. We will never comprehend this Unity, but our lives can be an expression of gratitude for the awareness we have that Unity comprehends us.