The Ground of Being

Death and Resurrection: Week 1

The fact that life and death are “not two” is extremely difficult to grasp, not because it is so complex, but because it is so simple—Ken Wilber [1]

We miss the unity of life and death at the very point where our ordinary mind begins to think about it—Kathleen Dowling Singh [2]

To accept death is to accept God. —Thomas Keating [3]

It is no surprise that we humans would deny death’s coming, fight it, and seek to avoid the demise of the only self we have ever known. As hospice worker and psychotherapist Kathleen Dowling Singh put it, “[Death] is the experience of ‘no exit,’ a recognition of the fact that the situation is inescapable, that one is utterly at the mercy of the power of the Ground of Being. . . . It is absurd and monstrous.” [4]

“The Ground of Being,” a commanding phrase that theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) used, is an excellent metaphor for what most of us would call God (Acts 17:28). For Singh, it is the source and goal that we deeply desire and desperately fear. It is the Mysterium Tremendum of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), which is alluring and frightful at the same time. Both God and death feel like “engulfment,” as when you first gave yourself totally to another person. It is the very union that will liberate us, yet we resist, retrench, and run. This is why historic male initiation rites invited the young man to face God and death head on—ahead of time—so he could know for himself that it could do his True Self no harm—but in fact would reveal it. Though we may resist dying at first, afterward we can ask ourselves, “What did I ever lose by dying?”

Death—whether one of many deaths to the false self or our physical dying—is simply returning to our spacious Ground of Being, to our foundation in Love. Kathleen Singh again:

Love is the natural condition of our being, revealed when all else is relinquished, when one has already moved into transpersonal levels of identification and awareness. Love is simply an open state with no boundaries and, as such, is a most inclusive level of consciousness. Love is a quality of the Ground of Being itself. In this regard and at this juncture in the dying process, love can be seen as the final element of life-in-form and the gateway to the formless. [5]
Love: Week 2 Summary

Love: Week 2

Summary: Sunday, November 4 - Friday, November 9, 2018

All we have to do is receive God’s gaze of love and then return what we have received. This is our spiritual agenda for our whole life: “love returning love” as my father St. Francis put it. (Sunday)

The only people who change, who are transformed, are people who feel safe, who feel their dignity, and who feel loved. (Monday)

To love God is to love what God loves. To love God means to love everything . . . no exceptions. (Tuesday)

John of the Cross consistently speaks of divine love as the template and model for all human love, and human love as the necessary school and preparation for any transcendent encounter. (Wednesday)

God wants creation to become fully conscious that it is imbued with divine love and living in that love. This final outcome is what Teilhard called “the Omega Point” and St. Paul called the Pleroma. —Louis Savary and Patricia Berne (Thursday)

Teilhard knew that love is not well served by collapsing into one another. It is better served by standing one’s own ground within a flexible unity so that more, deeper, richer facets of personhood can glow forth in “a paroxysm of harmonised complexity.” —Cynthia Bourgeault (Friday)

Practice: Ecstatic Dance

God cannot be known by thinking but by experiencing and loving. I hope you will take some time to explore this week’s theme in your lived experience.

Here’s one way you might play—with a childlike spirit—and feel Love’s flow in your body. You may even lose track of where you, the dancer, end and the dance itself begins.

Choose a favorite or new piece of music—classical, world, contemporary; anything that calls you to move! —and find a place in which you can listen and move without inhibition, barefooted if possible.

Allow your body to lead, following the invitation of the music. Let your mind take a back seat and tune in to the sensations of each part of your body.

Feel your feet connect with the ground. Let limbs and joints turn and bend as they will. Swing and sway your head, shoulders, hips. Sink deep into your body, remembering what it is to be a human animal.
Dance until you are pleasantly tired and then gradually slow your movements, perhaps to another musical tempo. Continue moving in smaller, gentler ways: breathe deeply, stretch your arms and legs, roll your head.

Come to a seated position and rest in stillness.

Reference:

For Further Study:


Image credit: “Ladybug” (detail) photograph, Roderico Y. Diaz.

Inspiration for this week’s banner image: Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

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**Love: Week 2**

**Unity in Differentiation**

Friday, November 9, 2018

*Cynthia Bourgeault*, one of CAC’s core faculty members, continues expanding on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s understanding of love as a creative force:

We can look to our own hearts to tell us more about what Teilhard sees as the essence of the complexification/consciousness process—hence of evolution (and hence, of love): his insistence that “union differentiates.” We often think of love in terms of merging, uniting, becoming one, but Teilhard was wary of such definitions; his practiced eye as an evolutionist taught him something quite different. True union . . . doesn’t turn its respective participants into a blob, a drop dissolving into the ocean. Rather, it presses them mightily to become more and more themselves: to discover, trust, and fully inhabit their own depths. As these depths open, so does their capacity to love, to give-and-receive of themselves. . . .

The term “codependency” was not yet current in Teilhard’s day, but he already had the gist of it intuitively. He knew that love is not well served by collapsing into one another. It is better served by standing one’s own ground within a flexible unity so that more, deeper, richer facets of personhood can glow forth in “a paroxysm of harmonised complexity.” [1]

The poet Rilke (1875–1926), Teilhard’s contemporary and in many respects kindred spirit, is on exactly the same wavelength. He asks in his *Letters to a Young Poet*:

. . . [F]or what would a union be of two people who are unclarified, unfinished, and still incoherent? It [love] is a high inducement for the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world in himself for the sake of another person. [2]

To become world in oneself for the sake of another. . . . “Hmmmm. Does love really ask us to become *world*? Does love make worlds? Is that what love does?

True, Teilhard does not directly tackle the question of first causes. But a clue to the cosmological riddle is surely embedded in his understanding of love as the driveshaft of evolution. . . . Suppose [love] is . . . an alchemical process: a tender and vulnerable journey of self-disclosure, risk, intimacy, yearning, and generativity whose ley lines are carved into the planet itself.

The whole universe story has come into being because God is a hidden treasure who longs to be known. And the way—the only way—this knowing can be released is in the dance of unity-in-differentiation which is the native language of love. If it takes a whole village to raise a child, it takes a whole cosmos to bear forth the depths of divine love.

References:
Evolving in Love

Evolving in Love
Thursday, November 8, 2018

The day will come when, after harnessing space, winds, the tide and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, [humanity] will have discovered fire. —Teilhard de Chardin [1]

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), the brilliant French Jesuit priest, mystic, and paleontologist, had much to say about love. Louis Savary, a theologian, and Patricia Berne, a psychologist, have been studying Teilhard’s writings for many years and finding ways to help others understand his work. Today I offer some of their insights:

God created this evolving universe because God is Love and each of us is God’s gift to the world. Our life purpose is to make a difference in transforming that world. . . .

For Teilhard, “love is the most universal, the most tremendous and the most mysterious of the cosmic forces.” [2] Love is both human and divine. Divine love is the energy that brought the universe into being and binds it together. Human love is whatever energy we use to help divine love achieve its purpose. . . .

Love of God and love of one another lies at the core of every traditional religion. Love not only permeates those religions, it transcends them and binds them together. Divine love embraces everyone and everything. There is nothing outside the divine embrace. . . .

From Teilhard’s perspective, then, helping the human family move toward the next step of human evolution in love is the most urgent and challenging task of contemporary spirituality. . . .

For Teilhard, love . . . is the essential nature of God, and the best name for God (see 1 John 4:8). As Teilhard envisioned it, divine love is the self-expressive creative force that gave birth to our evolving universe. [3] It is that same divine love that continuously keeps every atom of creation existing and moving forward on its grand evolutionary journey back to God. . . .

It was for the love of all created beings that God the Father sent his Son into the world that we might learn of God’s love for us and [that he might] show us how to live “The Way” of love (see John 3:16-17). . . .

According to Teilhard, God has implanted a divine spark of love in everything created, down to every last subatomic particle and photon of light. . . . That spark in each of us waits to be cultivated and developed until it matures. . . .

In contemporary language, Teilhard might say that God has an evolutionary “project” for creation that God wants to accomplish. . . . God wants creation to become fully conscious that it is imbued with divine love and living in that love. This final outcome is what Teilhard called “the Omega Point” and St. Paul called the Pleroma. [See Colossians 2:9-10,]

References:

The Meaning of Spiritual Love

Love: Week 2

The Meaning of Spiritual Love
Wednesday, November 7, 2018

When you looked at me
Your eyes imprinted your grace in me;
For this you loved me ardently;
And thus my eyes deserved
To adore what they behold in you.
... And let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty.
—John of the Cross [1]

When we read poetry as beautiful and profound as this verse, we can see why John of the Cross (1542–1591) was far ahead of his time in the spiritual and psychological understanding of how love works and how it changes us at a deep level. He consistently speaks of divine love as the template and model for all human love, and human love as the necessary school and preparation for any transcendent encounter.

In the inspired passage above, John describes the very process of love at its best. Here is my paraphrase:

You give a piece of yourself to the other.
You see a piece of yourself in the other (usually unconsciously).
This allows the other to do the same in return.
You do not need or demand anything back from them,
because you know that you are both participating
in a single, Bigger Gazing and Loving—
one that fully satisfies and creates an immense Inner Aliveness.
Simply to love is its own reward.

You accept being accepted—for no reason and by no criteria whatsoever! This is the key that unlocks everything in me, for others, and toward God. So much so that we call it “salvation”!

To put it another way, what I let God see and accept in me also becomes what I can see and accept in myself. And even more, it becomes that whereby I see everything else. This is why it is crucial to allow God and at least one other person to see us in our imperfection and even in our nakedness, as we are—rather than as we ideally wish to be. It is also why we must give others this same experience of being looked upon in their imperfection; otherwise, they will never know the essential and utterly transformative mystery of grace. This is the glue that binds the universe of persons together.

Such utterly free and gratuitous love is the only love that validates, transforms, and changes us at the deepest levels of consciousness. It is what we all desire and what we were created for. Once we allow it for ourselves, we will almost naturally become a conduit of the same for others. In fact, nothing else will attract us anymore or even make much sense.

Can you let God “look upon you in your lowliness,” as Mary put it (Luke 1:48), without waiting for some future moment when you believe you are worthy? Simply love what God sees in you. Many of us never go there, because to be loved in this way is to live in the naked now, and it is indeed a very naked moment.

References:

Inspiration for this week’s banner image: Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

Seeing with God’s Eyes

Love: Week 2

Seeing with God’s Eyes

Tuesday, November 6, 2018

Love [people] even in [their] sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov[1]

God refuses to be known in the way we usually know other objects; God can only be known by loving God. Yet much of religion has tried to know God by words, theories, doctrines, and dogmas. Belief systems have their place; they provide a necessary and structured beginning point, just as the dualistic mind is good as far as it goes. But then we need the nondual or mystical mind to love and fully experience limited ordinary things and to peek through the cloud to glimpse infinite and seemingly invisible things. This is the contemplative mind that can “know spiritual things in a spiritual way,” as Paul says (1 Corinthians 2:13).

What does it mean when Jesus tells us to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind (not just our dualistic mind), and strength (Luke 10:27)? What does it mean, as the first commandment instructs us, to love God more than anything else? To love God is to love what God loves. To love God means to love everything... no exceptions.

Of course, that can only be done with divine love flowing through us. In this way, we can love things and people in themselves, for themselves—not for what they do for us. That’s when we begin to love our family, friends, and neighbors apart from what they can do for us or how they make us look. We love them as living images of God in themselves, despite their finiteness.

Now that takes work: constant detachment from ourselves—our conditioning, preferences, and knee-jerk reactions. We can only allow divine love to flow by way of contemplative consciousness, where we stop eliminating and choosing. This is the transformed mind (see Romans 12:2) that allows us to see God in everything and empowers our behavior to almost naturally change.

Religion, from the root religio, means to reconnect, to bind back together. I would describe mystical moments as those attention-grabbing experiences that overcome the gap between you and other people, events, or objects, and even God, where the illusion of separation disappears. The work of spirituality is to look with a different pair of nondual eyes, beyond what Thomas Merton calls “the shadow and the disguise” [2] of things until we can see them in their connectedness and wholeness. In a very real sense, the word “God” is just a synonym for everything. So if you do not want to get involved with everything, stay away from God.

References:

I think most people are called to marriage because we need at least one other person to be like a mirror for us, to reflect our best self—and our worst self—in a way that we can receive. The interesting thing about a mirror is that it doesn’t change the image; it simply takes it in as it is. Our closest friends or life partner hold a mirror up to us, revealing our good side and our dark side and reminding us that we still haven’t really learned to love. That’s what every healthy relationship does. When we fall in love, we fall into an infinite mystery.

That’s why Jesus gave what was symbolically an infinite number, “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22), as the number of times even good people will need to forgive each other.

Thankfully, the Gospel does give us a blessed assurance that we are operating inside of an abundant, limitless, infinite Love. So even though we will constantly fail, failure is not the final word. We also have hope that everything can be mended, healed, and restored. Where the welding takes place is normally the strongest place of all on a steel bar. It’s the breaking and the welding and the mending that creates the real beauty of relationship. This is the dance of intimacy: as we ask one another for forgiveness, as we confess to one another that once again we didn’t do it right. Don’t be surprised and don’t hate yourself for it (which we all do). Darn it, I didn’t love right again! How can I miss the point so many times?

It’s when we do it wrong that we are taught vulnerability. We finally realize we are falling ever-deeper into something we can never live up to—a sustained vulnerability, a continual risk. It’s not a vulnerability and an intimacy that we need just now and then. Eventually, it becomes second nature to apologize, to admit we are wrong, to ask for forgiveness but not to hate ourselves for it.

The dynamics for divine intimacy and human intimacy are the same. I believe one is a school for the other. Most start with human intimacy and move from there to divine intimacy. But some begin with the divine ambush, first learning how to be vulnerable before God, and then passing it on to others.

The only people who change, who are transformed, are people who feel safe, who feel their dignity, and who feel loved. When you feel loved, when you feel safe, and when you know your dignity, you just keep growing! That’s what we do for one another as loving people—offer safe relationships in which we can change. This kind of love is far from sentimental; it has real power. In general, we need a judicious combination of safety and necessary conflict to keep moving forward in life.

Reference:

Image credit: “Ladybug” (detail) photograph, Roderico Y. Diaz.

Inspiration for this week’s banner image: Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov
All we have to do is receive God’s gaze and then return what we have received. We simply complete the divine circuit, “love returning love” as my father St. Francis put it. This is our spiritual agenda for our whole life.

We are saved by standing consciously and confidently inside the force field that is Christ, not by getting it right in our private selves. This is too big a truth for the small self to even imagine. We’re too tiny, too insecure, too ready to beat ourselves up. We do not need to be correct, but we can always try to remain connected to our Source. The great and, for some, disappointing surprise is that many people who are not at all correct are the most connected by reason of their intense need and desire.

All we can do is fall into the Eternal Mercy—into Love—which we can never really fall out of because “we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God,” as Paul so beautifully stated (1 Corinthians 3:23). Eventually, we know that we are all saved by mercy in spite of ourselves. That must be the final humiliation to the ego.

Our holiness is first of all and really only God’s holiness, and that is why it’s certain and secure. It is a participation in love, a mutual indwelling, not an achievement or performance on our part. “If anyone wants to boast, let them boast in the Lord,” Paul shouts at the end of his long argument (1 Corinthians 1:31). Jeremiah said the same long before Paul: “Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise boast of their wisdom, nor the strong boast of their strength, nor the rich boast of their riches. But rather, let those who boast, boast of this, that they know me” (Jeremiah 9:22-23).

References:


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Love: Week 1 Summary

Love: Week 1

Summary: Sunday, October 28-Friday, November 2, 2018

My hope, whenever I speak or write, is to help clear away the impediments to receiving, allowing, trusting, and participating in a foundational Love. (Sunday)

The contemplative is not just aware of God’s Loving Presence, but trusts, allows, and delights in it. (Monday)

For Jesus, prayer seems to be a matter of waiting in love, returning to love, trusting that love is the unceasing stream of reality. (Tuesday)

Jesus taught us what God is like through his words, his actions, his very being, making it clear that “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16). If God is Trinity and Jesus is the face of God, then it is a benevolent universe. (Wednesday)

God is always given, incarnate in every moment and present to those who know how to be present themselves. To be present in prayer can be like the experience of being loved at a deep level. (Thursday)

The root of suffering is the deprivation of love. Now in reality, there’s no such thing as the deprivation of love, but there is the deprivation of the capacity to experience the love that is never missing.—James Finley (Friday)

Practice: I Love You, I Love You

James Finley offers a simple guided meditation to awaken us to our oneness with Love.

When you sit in meditation, your breathing naturally slows. Quietly focusing your attention on your breathing is a way of slowing down and settling into a deep meditative awareness of oneness with God. Breathing out, be quietly aware of breathing out. Breathing in, be quietly aware of breathing in. Each time you realize you have drifted off into thoughts, memories, sensations, and other ego-based modes of being, simply return to your breathing as your anchoring place in present-moment attentiveness.
Your efforts in following the path of breath awareness might be enhanced by repeating a word or phrase with each breath. A practice I have found particularly helpful is to pair breath awareness with the phrase “I love you.”

As you inhale, listen to God’s silent I love you in which God’s sustaining love is pouring itself out and giving itself to you as the gift and miracle of your very life. As you exhale, exhale yourself, that is, give yourself in a whispered I love you that incarnates the gift of your self to God, who with your next inhalation is being poured out and given to you as the gift and miracle of your very life.

If feelings of sadness come welling up within you as you sit in meditation, let your next inhalation be your way of receiving into yourself the presence of God, loving you through and through in the midst of your sadness. As you exhale, let your exhalation be your way of giving yourself in love, sadness and all, to the infinite love that with your next inhalation is giving itself to you whole and complete in the midst of your sadness.

So too with bodily pain, with feelings of fear and confusion, of loneliness or quiet joy and amazement that may rise and fall within you as you sit in meditation. Whatever it is that may be occurring within you, let each inhalation be your way of receiving into your self the infinite love that is sustaining you and loving you through and through in the midst of all that arises and falls away within you as you sit in this meditative stance of devotional sincerity.

Let each exhalation be your way of giving yourself in love to the love that loves you through and through in all that is arising and falling away within you whatever that might be. Sit this way with all your heart, knowing and trusting that in this reciprocity of love your destiny in love is being fulfilled.

You can practice this “I love you” prayer in little passing moments as you go through your day. You can practice it as you awaken in the middle of the night, letting love be your way of falling back to sleep. It is by way of this prayer that you can learn from God that love alone has the authority to name who you really are and are called to be in the midst of all that life might send your way, right up to the moment of your death and beyond.

Reference:
Adapted from James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (HarperSanFrancisco: 2004), 30, 242-244.

For Further Study:
Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Shape of God: Deepening the Mystery of the Trinity* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2004), CD, DVD, MP3 download


James Finley, *Intimacy: The Divine Ambush* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2013), CD, MP3 download


Image credit: *Man praying on sidewalk with food*, Sergio Omassi.

Inspiration for this week’s banner image: Every act of complete self-giving in the name of the fullness, even though you feel like you are isolated, ignored, unconnected, and meaningless, connects you immediately and becomes a sacrament of the manifestation of that dance of perichoresis (the circle dance of the Trinity), the fullness of love. —Cynthia Bourgeault
Flesh and Spirit (2018) Chinese Drama. In the early 1960s, Xu Lingjun (Yu Xiaowei), who was mistakenly classified as a capitalist, decentralized the Helan Mountain Farm Team... 


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