

Presence, our own human failings and our worst sins. We do so because in our most desperate times we want forgiveness, we want resurrection, we want and crave comfort. And, yet we create a G*d in our image, making him, her, or they, into someone who may offer forgiveness, resurrection, and comfort, but who can, like us, be petty with our grudges and revenge.

And, I think that the first mistake we make is in naming him, her, or, they.

Let’s go back to one beginning . . .

In the Hebrew Bible, in Exodus 3:14, when the burning bush first presents itself to Moses,

Moses says to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

And, God says to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘[The Great]] ‘I am’” has sent me . . .’”³

Here we get a glimmer that G*d was never meant to be named and defined. Even the authors of Exodus, hesitated at providing Moses a name for G*d. They understood that probably this presence is not one that could be named, categorized, or, described. We understand that our human language is insufficient to describe the great “I am”. We know we don’t have the skills or intelligence to press this great presence into a box smaller than that presence. It is a fool’s errand, and yet, we keep doing it don’t we?

Indeed, what am I trying to do today? I’m trying to share with you my perspectives on the Great Presence, knowing that even as I try, I can’t do it well.

And, yet, here I am, with sufficient hubris to think that I can get close to sharing with you . . . a presence . . . that, when felt, when acknowledged, can be grounding and healing.

PAUSE

I came to Unitarian Universalism because I had traveled parts of the world as a child. I had seen people of many different lands and faiths living kindly with their neighbors and strangers. And, though, they often said their faith was the only “true” faith, I had my

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+3&version=NIV> December 6, 2019

doubts. Because . . . all of them, with their different faiths were just as kind as the other, and yet different in creed, dogma, and, theology. They had different perspectives on who G*d was, and yet could be magnanimously generous to others. To me, each had their own inherent worth and dignity.

My religious journey to Unitarian Universalism, had come through Presbyterianism (as a child) and the Greek Orthodox faith (as a young adult). Then I entered the open door of Universalism . . . and, it said, (1) that no matter what your religious perspective, all humans will be reconciled to G*d; and, (2) that the ‘Source of All’ can be found through many different faiths.

PAUSE

But, when I entered seminary I was quickly challenged by the biblical and theological books that spoke of G*d as though he (emphasis intended) was definable. I didn’t want to define G*d, but it’s hard to study what you cannot name.

I looked for a word, a name that I could use in my studies, that would translate what everyone else was calling G*d, into something tangible and yet transparent. Transparent, as in like a chameleon – something that could take on the ideals of many different faiths without being circumscribed by them.

For a time, while studying the Hebrew Bible, I turned to the name, Shekhinah (sh'-KHEE-nuh). For the Israelites, traveling in the wilderness for 40 years after leaving Egypt, Shekhinah was the divine feminine spirit that led them through the desert. From Exodus we learn she was a pillar of cloud during the day, and a pillar of fire at night, and that she guided them to the promised land. She was an ongoing presence to them. A great presence.

I liked that the image of Shekhinah shattered the traditional patriarchal image of G*d. I liked that (1) it refers to the feminine “Divine Presence of G-d,”⁴ and that (2) it comes from a word that means “to dwell within.” Thus, Shekinah is the G-d that dwells within.⁵ It is an indwelling divine presence, much like “the spark of the divine” that dwells within each of us, as coined by Descartes. It is much like what we mean when we sometimes say that we recognize the inherent worth and divine spark that exists within each human being.

⁴ <http://www.jewfaq.org/search.shtml?Keywords=Shechinah> December 6, 2019

⁵ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2438527/jewish/The-Shechina.htm December 6, 2019

Yes, I liked that name, Shekhinah, and it worked for a while, until my theology shifted to something broader.

PAUSE

Language is a powerful tool. Sometimes, it can describe the tangible concrete world around us, but as soon as you try to describe subjective elements, let alone the invisible, it requires that we impose on it our own perceptions to give it the borders necessary for us to capture an idea. And, yet, somethings cannot be captured. Nor should they.

A Poem from Liz James

The Gift of Presence

even though i was only fourteen
i'd already been writing poems
for years
when i rounded the corner in that path

my feet hummed like children's tunes through the spring grass
stumbling into a moment i have never been able to describe

all i can tell you is that
there was the forest
and the lake
and the dawn, seeping in
and me, at fourteen years old, head tilted back and lips parted

i hadn't known that the world could be
that beautiful

i had already started my lifelong discipline of
preserving everything important in words
like pinned butterflies in endless albums
i had thought that the world was something i could
find a way to keep

and in that blooming galileo moment i found out
about clouds and comets and galaxies and the ungraspable gorgeous awe of it that
filled every part of me
it, infinite, and me finite

i had not even enough space in my soul in that moment to form
the simplest preschool syllables

in one moment i was given wings by how huge beauty can be
and in the next moment shredded by the grief of all
i could not carry

i didn't know that i would spend my life humming the tune of that
first, unwordable moment
as though searching for forgotten lyrics

as though if i succeeded i would be able to take back
the part of me that i left there
gasping
at the bend in the path

PAUSE

The great indescribable, invisible, presence . . . some of us call it the Spirit of Life, some of us call it G*d, some of us call it Nature, some call it Beauty, some of us call it "suffering", some use a person to stand in for it, like Jesus, or Muhammad, or, Buddha, or, The Bab from the Baha'i faith. All these descriptions are only our inadequate human efforts to name the bigger-than-we-know-how-to-describe-it "presence".

PAUSE

There is yet another yet another kind of presence. I offer it here for those who don't believe in a larger-than-ourselves G*d. There is something called the "ministry of presence". It's what happens when we listen to someone else with our whole mind and body.

It is something like the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, only it applies to how we are with others. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Mindfulness is when you are truly there, mind and body together. You breathe in and out mindfully, you bring your mind back to your body, and you are there. When your mind is there with your body, you are established in the present moment."⁶

6 <https://www.lionsroar.com/mindful-living-thich-nhat-hanh-on-the-practice-of-mindfulness-march-2010/> December 6, 2019

Taken a step further, here is how Henry Nouwen describes a ministry of presence. He says,

More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it is not as simple as it seems. My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It is difficult not to have plans, not to organize people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them.

This kind of presence is a great presence, too, but it's on the human scale, and is perhaps a little more honest as it comes from us and we can own it for ourselves. This kind of presence like the Great Presence both do the same thing. This feeling of presence offers the desperate hope, the injured compassion, the wounded love. But of these things, the greatest is hope. Hope for a better life, hope of being treated with respect, hope of release from our addictions, hope for escape from oppression, hope simply for a better day tomorrow. Because, it is in our hope that the presence that is other worldly and yet, also dwells within, lives.

PAUSE

Paul Tillich described it this way . . . naming “presence” as “grace”.

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and [restless]. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes [, sometimes] at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted.'⁷

You are accepted.

Amen.

***Hymn 1052** *The Oneness of Everything*

***Closing Words & Extinguishing the Chalice**

Please remain standing as you are able and join hands as you are willing.

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. We extinguish this flame but not the sure knowledge that the presence of love in our lives is, when acknowledged, the binding force of humanity. This, we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Please be seated to sing our closing

Closing Song 1031 *Filled with Loving Kindness*

Silent Reflection

Let us sit together in silence as we reflect on the message and meaning of today's service.

⁷ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1538213-grace-strikes-us-when-we-are-in-great-pain-and>
December 6, 2019