

## The Deities Within

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It's no secret human beings are mystifying creatures. We pride ourselves on our ability to reason, but if you've ever had the inclination to read a debate on social media or the misfortune to get entangled in one, especially over politics, you quickly realize, reason, to quote the immortal Rodney Dangerfield, "Don't get no respect."

Of course, even when reason is employed it doesn't guarantee agreement or the resolution of conflict. One must resign oneself to the fact that not everyone sees things as you do. In the case of politics or religion, where emotion is often highly charged, this is easier said than done, but on other issues the stakes don't seem nearly as high.

Take for instance chain restaurants. Not necessarily the small local two or three location franchises, but those big chains with a vast regional, national, or international presence. As it happens, I have, more than a few times, found myself arguing with a friend against patronizing one of these big chains, especially when traveling. I mean, why in the world would I eat at a restaurant that has locations in Venice, St. Thomas, Reykjavik, Toronto, New Haven, and Tucson?

My friend will argue that with chains you know what you're getting. Strangely enough, that also happens to be my argument against them. But whereas my friend likes the uniformity, I find it dull.

Now, if we're just talking about dining preferences, then who really cares? But for me these seemingly nonsensical debates often prove an entry point for reflection on greater, more impactful questions concerning our lives. For example, where else do people seek uniformity and why?

I'm reminded now of a time I was driving from my home to the church in Brookfield, MA where I was serving as minister. As I was driving my phone rang and thanks to modern technology, I was able to answer the phone and talk, "hands free", as they say. It was the music director at the church. I don't remember the exact reason for the call, but the fact that she called rather than

just emailing or waiting to see me in person meant it was something somewhat urgent.

Now, the traffic was heavy and just as she paused in the conversation, having asked me, “What do you think?”, a car came out of nowhere and cut me off. Forgetting I was on the phone, I shouted, “Are you bleeping kidding me? You bleep, bleep, bleep!” (except I didn’t say bleeping or bleep).

After a period of awkward silence, a notably surprised and timid voice came through the speaker of my phone, “What?” asked the music director. I immediately apologized, explained what happened and suggested I call her back when the traffic was lighter. I ended the call and started to laugh.

There was a time when I would have been so mortified by what happened, berate myself mercilessly, and ruminate about how it exposed to both the music director and me how I’m not really the person people think I am or I’m supposed to be. This would be followed by repeated self-assurance that I really am the calm, polite person she usually experiences and whoever that was who just swore like a sailor in anger (no offense to sailors), whoever that was, is as much a stranger to me as to her. Then I might resolve to increase my meditation practice as if to lock that foul mouthed hot headed intruder out the pantheon of selves that make the human being known as me.

The thing is, I’ve been practicing meditation for years and guess who still shows up at least some of the time when someone cuts me off in traffic to this day? He shows up at other times too. Like when I’m trying to do a home repair that isn’t going nearly as smoothly as it did for the guy in the YouTube video I’ve re-watched fifteen times in increasing frustration and disbelief. Granted, he can be embarrassing but then he’ll also show up when I read about or experience injustice. Still, for a time his recurring presence puzzled me and it seemed a clear indication my spiritual practice wasn’t going as I expected.

Then one summer I picked up a book by the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield. I don’t remember which one of his books it was, but in it he recounted a story in which a person went to a monastery to study meditation. While there, the person underwent a miraculous personal transformation. When the time came, they left the monastery filled with that deep peace that arises when one has experienced one’s kinship with all. Of course, the world outside the monastery isn’t as conducive to promoting, let alone sustaining such transformation and within weeks of leaving the monastery, the person found themselves right back to their old reactionary selves when confronted with the world outside the protective cloister of the monastery.

This experience, common to virtually every spiritual practitioner, regardless of the practice is enough to cause some, perhaps many, to change, abandon, or become cynical about spiritual practice. But it is precisely at this point that one is invited to go deeper and to ask, “What I am expecting from this practice?”

And today, more often than not what people say they expect is to achieve is, “wholeness”, “oneness”, “unity”, or some similar idea. Probe a little further as to what exactly they imagine these states to be and you find they’re imagining a flattening or smoothing of one’s experience of self in response to the vicissitudes of life. Essentially people seem to hope or expect to become the spiritual equivalent of a chain restaurant, always the same no matter where they are.

Like the people in the story of the yetzer ha-ra as told by Harold Kushner, our second reading this morning, we imagine a life without the irksome, annoying, embarrassing, paradoxical, or otherwise less noble qualities within us and others, will be paradise. Now, in the story when the people manage to catch and lock away that within them they consider the cause of all their troubles they find life stops altogether. Turns out the struggle with these “problematic” aspects of ourselves is part of life itself and without which we can’t possibly be anything remotely considered, “whole”. Yet we persist in the idea that wholeness means a perfectly integrated, unified, and consistent self. A self where only those qualities or aspects of self considered desirable or admirable are acknowledged, allowed to reside within, and be expressed.

During our time for all ages we shared some of the 99 names for Allah or God in Islam: The Beneficent; The Merciful; The embodiment of Peace; The Great Forgiver; The Impartial Judge; The All-Forgiving; The Most Generous; The All-Wise; The Most Loving; The Most Kind; The Just One, to name a few.

Regardless of one’s religious tradition, these names echo qualities or aspects of self many try to cultivate through spiritual practice and religious observation. Qualities we might reason reside harmoniously within and effortlessly manifest themselves externally from one who is whole. Consequently, we may also reason, one who is whole would never be described as The Distresser, The Avenger, The Delayer, The Destroyer; The Humiliator; The Abaser; or The Ever-Dominating. Oh, but wait. These are also some of the 99 names for Allah. And so it is, all of those the names, the ones we like and shared together, as well as those that make us shudder and squirm like those I just named, are said to describe a singular deity in Islam.

Interestingly, God as encountered in the Judeo-Christian tradition suggests a similarly complex or internally fragmented deity. In the creation myth found in Genesis, God, in whose image humankind is said to be created, is called both Elohim and Adonai.

Elohim, notes Rabbi Howard Cooper, literally means “The gods, divine beings” and it speaks to or refers to the various elements or manifestations, creative and destructive of the God presented in the myth. Meanwhile Adonai, meaning Lord, refers to or represents an singular God. Thus within this one God there exists a multiplicity or creative and destructive energies or potential manifestations held in tension. This inner polytheism is, I imagine, what’s behind people’s observation and sometimes alarm at how different God seems depending on what book or story from the Bible one is reading. Indeed, this God seems a lot like us and we like it.

My point here is the stories and descriptions of God from the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions suggest wholeness may not be what we think or imagine it to be. Although these traditions, being decidedly monotheistic, have tended to emphasize, rather stridently at times, the unity of God, the deeper story is that of a God containing multitudes, many gods within, if you will. And when we realize that, our ideas about wholeness begin to change. Indeed, we start to acknowledge rather than try to banish the multiplicity, the deities within, that makes us who we are.

Wholeness then starts to move away from being an escapist fantasy of perpetual uniformity (a fantasy which in fact can turn any of us, regardless of how liberal or conservative our religious tradition, into rigid, judgmental people) and toward a deeper awareness and appreciation of the pantheon of deities within ourselves and others.

Indeed, we come to accept our own selves, as the noted author Salam Rushdie observes, “as composites, often contradictory, even internally incompatible...Each of us is many different people. Our younger selves differ from our older selves; we can be bold in the company of our lovers and timorous before our employers, principled when we instruct our children and corrupt when offered some secret temptation; we are serious and frivolous, loud and quiet, aggressive and easily abased....The concept of the integrated...replaced by this jostling crowd of Is. And yet, unless we are damaged or deranged, (deep down) we usually have a relatively clear sense of who we are. (And can) ...agree with the many selves to call them “me.”

Wholeness as an acknowledgement and acceptance of our multiplicity, our whole selves, is vastly different from wholeness as a perfectly integrated self, which demands a perfection greater than that present in human conceptions of God.

The more we are able to comfortably struggle with, rather than deny or destroy the tensions of our own inner polytheism, the less threatened by it in others we may become, and thus perhaps find ourselves upon that path to peace that passeth all understanding.

May it be so  
Amen and Blessed Be