

Becoming a human being

I was born a man (woman), but now my task is to become a human being
Rabbi Abraham Heschel

I do not want to be myself only; I want the other to be part of who I am and I want to be part of the other.
Miroslav Volf

1968 saw the first photograph of planet Earth- our home- a “bright, blue and white Christmas tree ornament and the black sky, that infinite universe”. An astronaut saw the earth “so small and so fragile and such a precious little spot on the universe that you can block it out with your thumb”. And this little spot contains “everything that means anything to you- all of history and music and poetry and art and death and birth and love and tears and joy....”

And this reminds us Julian’s astonishing vision of the hazelnut in the palm of her hand, so small, that “I marveled that it could be, for I thought it might have crumbled”. But it was her conviction, that this tiny nut, so small yet the ground of all humanity, was held together because it was created by love, and that love was its meaning.

Imagine a hazelnut in the palm of your hand - look at it, feel it, let it speak to you of its littleness and fragility.

Let it also speak to you of your littleness and fragility, of your life and potential and interconnectedness with everything that is.

Let yourself be looked at by God- and marvel that all things are held together and created by love- and that love is your meaning.

As you imagine the hazelnut in the palm of your hand, call to mind the image of this planet Earth, our home. It speaks to us of a common humanity, without the boundaries of tribe or nation, ethnicity or colour or gender. “We were all once one”. (Paul VI) Let this image nurture you as you pray for your sisters and brothers, and for the whole community of creation.

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Julian of Norwich (1342?-1420) is the most popular of the English mystics. As an anchoress she lived in a cell attached to a Norwich church and engaged in prayer and spiritual guidance. In the face of intense suffering she could joyfully exclaim: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".

And in this he showed me something small: no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: it lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

Julian of Norwich, **Revelations of Divine Love 5**

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Fostering a climate where communion takes place

We were conceived in the mind of God as the partner in a dialogue.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Dialogue demands that I leave the place I dwell - the landscape of feelings and thoughts that seem important to me - in order to dwell with your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, fears, hopes. I must deny myself-forsake the familiar, give up my life - in order to experience your life.

*The purpose of dialogue is never to persuade another person to accept our opinions or values, or view of the world; rather it is **to create understanding- a climate where communion takes place.***

Elizabeth O'Connor

“Conversation” is linked etymologically to “conversion” - which means that in all genuine dialogue we move beyond where we are to a new place and a new attitude.

Dialogue is an embrace of the other in the middle of unanswered questions. “Open arms are...a sign of discontent with my own self- enclosed identity and a code of desire for the other”.

Miroslav Volf

Do you have to be right all the time? Can you tolerate ambiguity, not knowing?

Are you comfortable with questions? Or do you always need answers?

Do you have some bottom line, non-negotiable truths? What are they?

Do they allow you to enter into real dialogue?

How open are you? How closed?

And how do you cope with the person who is closed, dogmatic, opinionated?

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Faith - not so much **believing** in a set of propositions - but openness, seeing and hearing what IS (and not what should be) - being open to surprise, newness and to grace.

In God's sight we do not fall: in our own sight we do not stand. I see both of these to be true. But God's sight is the higher truth.

The higher, 'God's sight', comforts us spiritually in him, and gives us true enjoyment; the other, more lowly, sight keeps us fearful and ashamed. But our good Lord wants us always to pay more attention to the higher, while not neglecting all knowledge of the lower, until the time we are brought to heaven, where our reward will be the Lord Jesus, and we shall be filled with joy and bliss for ever.

Julian of Norwich 8

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Jesus is God's way of being open to the world: Jesus is humanity's way of being open to God.

Every person is already radically open [to God] in the very core of his or her being.

Richard McBrien

In prayer we discover what we already have. You stand where you are, you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it, and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already have.

Thomas Merton

Jesus invites us to become what we already are. Jesus reveals or uncovers for us how we stand before God - and how God stands before us.

This openness of God to us, and us to God - seen in Jesus - is nothing less than what Paul talks of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ". The grace (or gift) of God is such that it wins the response of grace (or gratitude) from us.

Grace - giving and receiving, attractive and attracting, gift and response, gracefulness and gratitude, graciousness and generosity - all in one, all in the grace of Jesus....and we are created to be caught up into this.

What's it like to think of Jesus as a "mirror", showing you your "true self"?

This self is not someone you have to fabricate or work hard at.

This is the One who simply asks you to accept and embrace "the stranger who has always loved you".

Julian of Norwich says that there is a godly will in every one of us that has never consented to sin. Each one of us has been perfectly kissed and caressed before we were born. Each of us is made in the image of God. What would it be like to live out of this place, rather than the inadequate or insecure self which too often hijacks or drives you?

We need to fall, and we need to realize this. If we never fell we should never know how weak and wretched we are in ourselves; nor should we fully appreciate the astonishing love of our Maker.

By the simple fact that we fell we shall gain a deep and wonderful knowledge of what God's love means. Love that cannot, will not, be broken by sin, is rock-like, and quite astonishing.

Julian of Norwich 61

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Jesus is the imagination of God

We are made in God's image - and are image bearers and image makers.

We grasp or deal with reality through our imaginations.

The power of our imaginations can "release the emotions and move us to action". "Images are forms of transport. They get us going. They move us on" (Anslem Gruen).

We need the imagination to envision new possibilities, to make connection between our experience and the stories and texts of our tradition.

"The slow fire of the impossible is lit...by the imagination"

Emily Dickinson

*What you are in love with
what seized your imagination
will affect everything*

Pedro Arrupe

The imagination evokes rather than explains. It does not tell us anything new but revives our awareness of what we already know. It activates the dark secret or memory we all carry within us - of our original goodness and worth.

Ask yourself what you feed your mind with.

What stories or parables you tell yourself?

What negative images do you hang on to?

Don't ask so much where they come from, but where they lead.

If they lead away from life, freedom and hope; if they lead to further anxiety or negativity you can be pretty sure they are not of god, but come from a deep inadequate or insecure part of you.

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Imagine that you were kissed by God before you were born. Each of us carries the dark secret of being kissed and caressed by hands far gentler than ours. The dark memory acts as a kind of prism through which we see and experience everything that happens to us. We go through life never fully arriving, slightly disappointed, because we have experienced something more infinitely precious. When we see goodness and beauty and truth out there it is because they resonate with the dark memory within. When we are angry, frustrated or abused, it is because these experiences do not match or resonate with this dark memory of being kissed.

Ronald Rolheiser

We are enfolded alike in the Father, in the Son, and in the holy Spirit. And the Father is enfolded in us, the Son too, and the Holy Spirit as well: all mightiness, all wisdom, all goodness - one God, one Lord.

Our faith is nothing else but a right understanding, and true belief, and sure trust, that with regard to our essential being we are in God, and God in us, though we do not see him.

Julian of Norwich 54

Jesus is the body language of God

Don Watson, in a book called *Death Sentence* (on the decay of public language), says that when you make a speech, you are attempting an embrace - you are saying to your listeners - *you and me both*.

This is a helpful insight into Jesus- who is attempting an embrace with us - who is always saying to us, *you and me both*.

Jesus - as the embodiment of *agape* love - which Pope John Paul II said is best translated in English by the word *solidarity* - says to us that God is not going to bypass our bodies. God meets us here, in our flesh and blood reality, "present in the quick of being, one's own body, and in the present tense itself, in existence as it exists, in the fibre and pulse of the world" (Dennis Potter).

*Jesus said "this is my body" - and this is what we say at every Eucharist, rather than "this is his body". This is Jesus saying "you and me both". We are involved, implicated whenever we speak of God. In fact - far better than speaking **about** God, we at best speak to God - to a Thou or You, and not an "It". God-talk asks of us a deep integrity of the human heart, so that when I say "I believe" it is simply another way of saying "I am"*

H.A.Williams

When we make a full, responsive, authentic and embodied response to an-other, to our circumstances, to creation, then we have discovered our unique and personal way of being Jesus in the world. This is more than the "imitation" of Christ; it is discovering that "we are found in him, and he in us". Another way of saying this is "Becoming what we are".

Jesus says to us that God is on our side, that God-is-with-us. Far from "intervening" from outside, God is living and yearning from within. Like a single cell in the process of evolution "groping" towards greater complexity of life, God is "groaning" with our spirits towards greater intimacy, greater intensity of life.

Jesus is always asking us to locate saving grace in "the warmth and sweetness and dryness and terror of actual living".

H.A.Williams

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He did not say, 'You will never have a rough passage, you will never be over-strained, you will never feel uncomfortable', but he did say, You will never be overcome'. God wants us to pay attention to these words, so as to trust him always with strong confidence, through thick and thin.

Julian of Norwich 68

Truth sees God: wisdom gazes on God. And these two produce a third, a holy, wondering delight in God, which is love.

Julian of Norwich 44

The other is the place of encounter with the divine

"The other is not the obstacle in the way of my coming-to-be, but is what makes the coming-to-be possible". The other speaks of the generosity "which wants to distract me from my self-absorption in too small an identity"

James Alison

**I cannot be me without you,
and we cannot be us without them.**

The other calls out from me the open arms of embrace, where I create "a space within myself for the other to come in....[and make] a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other".

Miroslav Volf

Take time to reflect on the web of relationships in your life. With some, it is easy to see the "gift" for you, and the "invitation" they offer you. But with others, it is more problematical. Find the courage to look clearly at people in your life you don't like, or don't get on with. Can you discover some common theme about these people- and the way they affect you? Perhaps you don't like being ignored, or rejected, or diminished? Perhaps you resent being controlled or manipulated? So instead of seeing such people as "obstacles"- perhaps you could ask how they might "gift" you and what it is they "invite" you to become.

Reflecting on "the other" offers us an opportunity to consider the "other" in myself- the one I reject, the outcast, the one I despise or who embarrasses or shames me. Jesus always invites us into reconciliation which is the "defeat of otherness". Can you begin to embrace the "other" in you?

Jesus asks us to wake up to the "gift" of the stranger, the outsider- and even the enemy. "Love your enemies" is a bold invitation- asking of us courage and insight, offering us freedom (from prejudice and a hard heart) and promising hope and peace for our world.

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Our soul is united to him who is unchangeable goodness, and between him and our soul there is need neither for anger nor forgiveness in his sight. For the soul is completely united to God by his own goodness, and nothing whatever can come between God and the soul.

Julian of Norwich 46

The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God, and to let that goodness reach right down to our lowest depth of need.

Julian of Norwich 6

God of your goodness give me yourself, for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask for anything less, to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all.

Julian of Norwich 5

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Self-giving and unconditional love is the only absolute

Transcendence is the only real alternative to extinction

Vaclav Havel

Self-transcendence is the movement from within to beyond ourselves. It is reaching out - towards the other, to all living things. It is the deeply felt and joyous need to be in harmony with what we ourselves are not....because it is the expression and affirmation of the deep inter-connectedness, the “hidden wholeness” we have with each other.

The way forward is the way to someone else.

John V. Taylor

Jesus is the self-communication of God to the universe, and at the same time the self-transcendence of the universe to God (Karl Rahner). Jesus is both God’s unconditional love for all creation and creation’s unconditional response to that love. In Jesus we hear God’s YES to humanity and all of creation, and creation’s humanity’s YES to God. In Jesus we see both gift and response. He is our future who has already appeared. As you think about these things, can you join you “yes” to Jesus’ YES?

God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God’s giving that God’s self makes in the life of the Trinity.

Rowan Williams

The Christian vision isn’t an optional extra, a particular way of being religious. It is offering us a universal way of being human. Jesus- the one true human being - shows us that we are Christologically and paschally structured. We flourish when we give ourselves away. How attractive is that? Think about the little opportunities offered to you every day to create a space for another, to let go of your

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opinions and ideas, your need to fight back, to be defensive or to stay as the victim- and discover genuine and authentic community.

Jesus - who shows us something of how God looks at us - says to us that we matter, that we are good at heart, that we have an inherent and inalienable dignity. But there is a double dimension to this - for with this sense of value, dignity and inner beauty comes "the wound of self-knowledge". But Jesus is the one who "comes to wound us and to heal the wound". In him we see ourselves as we truly are.

From the time these things were first revealed I had often wanted to know what was our Lord's meaning. It was more than fifteen years after that I was answered in my spirit's understanding. 'You would know our Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. Hold on to this and you will now and understand love more and more. But you will not know or learn anything else- ever!

So it was that I learned that love was our Lord's meaning. And I saw for certain, both here and elsewhere, that before ever he made us, God loved us; and that his love has never slackened, nor ever shall. In this love all his works have been done, and in this love he has made everything serve us; and in this love our life is everlasting. Our beginning was when we were made, but the love in which he made us never had beginning. In it we have our beginning.

Julian of Norwich 86

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