

## Discourse two:

# Knowing, Doing, and Being Spirit

In this discourse, I want to illustrate more thoroughly the metaphor of **relationship with the Infinite** as an effective mode for viewing Spirit. I am going to describe Spirit as a trilogy of aspects: (1) **Oblivion**, (2) **Resurgence**, and (3) **Tranquility**. These three aspects might also be called: (1) Knowing Spirit, (2) Doing Spirit, and (3) Being Spirit. These are not stages of emergence, they are aspects of one actuality--three aspects of the actuality of Spirit all of which are present in each experience of Spirit. All the following descriptions are intended to be detailed illustrations of what it means to see Spirit as relationship with the Infinite.

I want to begin with Søren Kierkegaard's formula that Spirit is happening to us when the **external situation** occasions an **internal crisis** calling forth an **existential question** from which we wish only to **escape**. When these four dynamics are happening, **Spirit** is happening to us. If we choose **not to escape**, then Spirit is manifest in our lives in its healthy form. If we choose **to escape**, Spirit is manifest in its unhealthy form--as mistrust or suspicion of the Power that constitutes us, as bondage to some form of rigid personhood, and as some form of hatred or indifference toward our neighboring beings. These five dynamics--(1) external situation, (2) internal crisis, (3) existential question, (4) escape and (5) not to escape--form the master categories down the left-hand side of the following chart.

Across the top of the chart are the three master categories indicated above: (1) the **Oblivion** of Knowing Spirit, (2) the **Resurgence** of Doing Spirit, and (3) the **Tranquility** of Being Spirit.

In the resulting squares of this chart are titles for the types of experiences that define Spirit in each of these columns. It is my aim in this discourse to illuminate this chart with my and your experience so that no question remains as to what I am pointing to when I say that **Spirit is a relationship with the Infinite**.

<i>Moods</i> <i>Dynamics</i>	<b>Oblivion</b>	<b>Resurgence</b>	<b>Tranquility</b>
Spirit happens when the <b>External Situation</b>	Endings The Nothingness of Being The Void	Beginnings The Everythingness of Being The Fullness	Eternal Presence The Infinity of Being The Total Demand
occasions an <b>Internal Crisis</b>	Emptiness Too little hope	Overwhelmed Too much possibility	Scalded Too intense aliveness
calling forth an <b>Existential Question</b>	Who am I?	What do I?	How be I?
from which we wish only to <b>Escape.</b>	Hanging onto the past Hiding from awareness	Waiting for the future Floating above engagement	Numbing to the present Seeking for excitement
<b>The choice not to escape means that:</b>	Oblivion is my name. I face the dark abysses of death and enter into the anguishes of ambiguity.	Resurgence is my vocation. I embrace the vast mountains of care and flow with the rivers of responsibility.	Tranquility is my style. I live in peace with the hot fires of Awe-filled living and sail the wild seas of actuality.

## The Oblivion Dynamics

I would like to introduce the oblivion column of the chart with this short poem by D. H. Lawrence.

Do you think it is easy to change?  
Ah, it is very difficult to change and be different.  
It means passing through the waters of oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

Any time a person faces fundamental change, the death of the old person or personality is taking place. A crack has occurred in our sense of reality. A fracture has happened to our centralized ego, where “ego” means having a self-aware identification with our personality. A fracturing of our ego will usually happens when we confronting physical death, for at such a moment an ego becomes aware of the finitude of its identifications. Death challenges the ego’s view of itself as an everlasting entity. Actually, the interior pain of physical death is the pain of “ego-death.” Once we surrender our identification with our finite personality, (that is surrender our ego) the sting of death has been removed.

But the sting of “ego-death” takes place throughout our lives, not just at the end. An adolescent must die to his or her childhood personality in order to forge his or her first experiment in adult personhood. Marriage entails the death of singleness. Having children may be experienced as the death of childless liberty. Divorce is usually the death of a married state that has come to be taken for granted as just who I am. Changing my basic philosophy of life can also be a serious death experience. With any of these basic changes and many others, **Nothingness** appears in our consciousness. The vast **Void** surrounding us yawns into the foreground of our awareness.

Such external situations create the internal crisis of the oblivion dynamic. When a crucial part of our life-relatedness dies, we experience **emptiness**. Our living may seem altogether hopeless. Perhaps everything most important to us is truly gone.

Having lost our assumed identity through one of these deaths, our deep Spirit being raises this dreadful question: “**Who am I?**”

We take flight from hearing or dealing with this question by hanging on to the past. The old answers, however I got them, seem safer than any new answers to my basic identity. The momentum of the already established seems to protect me from my oblivion and from this hard question of my identity. So we long for: “the good ol’ days,” “the old-time religion,” “back in the 60’s,” “when I was younger,” etc. “**Hanging on to the past**” means entering into some swamp of nostalgia rather than living my current life. And if I choose to not flee my current life, this includes recognizing that the past is past and that only the present is present. The past is present as present memory but not as living actuality.

Even when we are, to some extent, living in the present, we can **hide from our awareness** of the endings that are indeed ending. We can invent new dream worlds to protect us from the harsh endings we do not want to face or deal with. We can stick our heads in the sand and refuse to see the actual lives we have on our hands. Hiding can look very busy. We can become so busy that we don’t have time left to stop and look at what is really transpiring in the deeper levels of our living.

Let me illustrate this entire oblivion-dynamic of Spirit-experience with one personal

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<sup>1</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (The Viking Press: 1964) page 727

example. I was, in an earlier period of my life, a very loyal and admiring disciple of one particular religious teacher. I was also his colleague, doing common work with him to the utmost of my ability. Then we entered into a time of deep disagreement over what I felt were very crucial matters. I soon came to see that he was not willing to learn from me what I was now learning. This opened my eyes to other aspects of what I came to call “his clay feet.” But realizing that I was no longer able to be this man’s intimate colleague was a huge crack in the eggshell which was my sense of reality. Surges of sadness, shock, and emptiness flowed through me. “Who am I now?” This question was dreadful, but also dreadfully exciting. I chose to leave this relationship and bear the dire consequences of doing so. But on every side of me, the temptation yawned to just slink back into the way it used to be or to simply sweep this whole matter under some rug of unconsciousness and pretend these awarenesses had never occurred.

Fleshing out a fresh answer to “Who am I?” took perhaps a decade, for I had to enter the dark abyss of questioning everything I believed and sorting out the profound stuff I had learned from this man from the stuff I now had to modify. Each of these decisions was fraught with ambiguities that I, and I alone, had to resolve.

This story also illustrates this profound truth about human life: all my important decisions are characterized by the “anguish of ambiguity.” I always lack full certainty in making my life decisions. Human life does not provide moral/ethical certitude. No Bible, no Koran, no Pope, no teacher, no parental training can tell me the right thing to do. The ethical wisdom of the ages may be helpful in instructing me that I live with other beings and have responsibilities as well as privileges, but as I face each concrete choice all that wisdom is insufficient to tell me precisely what to do. Fragmentary wisdom is my lot. And no supernatural someone is going to prompt me with magical hints. Rather, the Reality I face requires me to decide in ignorance. This necessity of having to surrender all my illusions of certainty is a prime illustration of the oblivion dynamic in Spirit experience.

Our most intense oblivion periods come and then pass away like all aspects of life. But the oblivion aspect of Spirit experience never goes away. Oblivion remains the foundation for whatever Spirit experiences come after it. The poetry of oblivion follows along with us during the entire course of our Spirit lives. As Nikos Kazantzakis put it, “We come from a dark abyss. We end in a dark abyss. And we call the luminous interval life.”<sup>2</sup> Or again, “Our body is a ship that sails on deep blue waters. What is our goal? To be shipwrecked! . . . Without hope, but with bravery, it is your duty to set your prow calmly toward the abyss.”<sup>3</sup>

Life can be pictured as a hall with a door at each end: the door of birth and the door of death. Outside each door is the dark abyss, the Void, the Infinite Emptiness. And as we look out the windows along our hallway of life we also see the same dark abyss. The dark abyss is our everyday companion.

To be a healthy Spirit person means choosing to hold hands with oblivion throughout the entire course of our lives. We are being healthy Spirit when we openly face the **dark abysses** of death and enter into the **anguish of ambiguity** that characterizes all our choices.

## **The Resurgence Dynamics**

Resurgence means the courageous activity of the Spirit person to create a fresh type of

<sup>2</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God* (Simon and Schuster: 1960) page 43

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* page 59

responding. On the other side of each oblivion experience, new life appears. The death of childhood can become a resurgence of living our first attempts at adulthood. The time following a painful divorce can become a time of resurgence in which a new personhood is forged and a deeper life constructed. The death of an old philosophy of life can become a period of passion and freedom in which some new and stronger philosophy is built.

Each experience of resurgence is an experience of profound freedom, for we are not just choosing between this and that; we are choosing in our primal depths to be a new person. The experience of resurgence also includes experiencing the fullness of life--the presence of possibilities we never saw before. **Fullness**, like nothingness, occasions an interior crisis--in this case, the crisis of feeling **overwhelmed with possibility**, overwhelmed with doing what we have never done before, overwhelmed with becoming what we have never been before.

Resurgence moments are like becoming a child all over again--just learning to walk, just learning to talk, stepping out into an unfamiliar life. Resurgence is in some ways the opposite of oblivion, but resurgence is not entirely pleasant just as oblivion is not entirely painful. Oblivion can include relief and peace, and resurgence can include pain and terror. Resurgence is an expansion of our sense of reality to a bigger sense of reality than our familiar "reality." Resurgence is new life flowing in through the cracks in our old sense of reality. And these new possibilities can seem way too much life to fit well into the customary slump of our living.

In our resurgence moments, our deep being is screaming out this profound question: "What do I?" "What do I do with my awesome life?" This challenging question of the Spirit Self now leaks through all the cracks. What we have been doing is no longer life-giving or life-fulfilling. The old doing is in some way inadequate to the realities we now have on our hands. So we find ourselves asking the question "What do I?"--a question that our remaining but fractured ego-self may be intensely unwilling to answer and reluctant to even ask.

We may find ourselves taking flight away from this question even before we mobilize ourselves to think about it clearly. We find ourselves simply "**waiting for the future.**" We tell ourselves: "Perhaps these choices will make themselves." "Tomorrow I will decide what to do." "Perhaps after the children leave home, I can decide." "Perhaps if I wait long enough, everything will straighten out by itself."

Even if we have the courage to live somewhat in the present, we find ourselves "**floating above true engagement.**" We see the challenges for a new sort of living spread before us, but we hover above them. We do not wholeheartedly engage in doing the new life that has become possible. We live on and on as if suspended in some safe basket from a balloon floating over the battle fields of real life. I may talk about newness, but I do not **do** newness: I do not **do** my new task, my new vocation, my new thrust. I suppress my true convictions and the courage it takes to get up from my current slump and to go out and perform my new life.

If, however, I choose to be myself (my Spirit self) at this moment of resurgence challenge, then movement begins and my understanding of my Spirit being can deepen. I may come to see that **resurgence itself is my new vocation**, my life-long vocation. I can now embrace the vision that I will never come to the end of reconstructing my life. Authentic life is always engagement in some new form of engagement. Spirit means embracing the vast **mountains of possibility** that stand before me and dealing with them in some freely chosen manner. It means experiencing a new level of responsibility for all that

surrounds me. I am able to respond, so I am responsible. I can move, therefore I must move. Spirit health means choosing to flow with the **vast currents of responsible living** that are opening before me. I do not have to know all the particulars that this new thrust will entail. I do not have to know how long this particular course of action will feel right to me. I only have to know that not answering the question “What do I?” is to miss my vocation, is to renounce my calling. Resurgence is my vocation. Resurgence is my calling. Resurgence is the aliveness that I am constituted to be. Resurgence is part of my deepest self. Resurgence is Spirit.

But in order to be resurgence, I must act. I cannot just think about it. I have to put my body as well as my mind on the road of actual new living. Resurgence is a deeply inward reality, but this inward reality is about external manifestation. If the body is not moving, resurgence is not happening. Flight from resurgence is happening instead.

### **The Tranquility Dynamics**

Tranquility, as a positive Spirit state, comes about as I surrender to being the particular oblivion moments and resurgence moments that life is dealing out to me. Tranquility is the state of being of the one who is facing squarely and embracing the dreadful truth that ego death and personality reconstruction are a perpetual journey. There is no pleasant place of escape from all this dying and rebirth. Oblivion and resurgence experiences are the only life that yawns before us.

True tranquility is different from the false bliss being peddled by comforting false teachers. “No more oblivion,” they say. “No more resurgence,” they say. “You can now have certainty in your hip pocket. You can now have spontaneous correctness as your behavior. All uncertainty, struggle, and challenge is,” so they say, “a thing of the past.” So say the false teachers. So say the tempters to a false bliss.

True bliss is a life of intensification, not a plateau of complacency. True bliss is not the end of oblivion and resurgence but the intensification of being willing to have oblivion and resurgence experiences my whole life long. As my oblivion and resurgence experiences intensify, my true tranquility intensifies as well. That **Infinity of Being** that cracked the eggshell of my self-projected reality and which is calling me forth into the perpetual task of forming new eggshells within which to live, is now becoming for me a continuing and scalding presence. And this continuing **Presence** is experienced as a **Total Demand**--as the demand to be my oblivion and resurgence experiences as the normal, ongoing, ups and downs of my real life. Such Spirit intensity requires courage, but this courage is aliveness. Such courage is the willingness to be alive at the extremities of living.

This Total Demand--this requirement to be courageously tranquil--is experienced not as emptiness and not as being overwhelmed. It is experienced as being **scalded by intensity**. This interior crisis is one of entering into the hot water of a life that seems too intense for us. How can I illustrate this?

Let us imagine that I have written a good book sharing my spirit experience. Then I have an experience that reveals that my good book was not so good as I once thought, so I write a new book that says better what my experience actually is and has been. This was an oblivion and resurgence experience at one and the same time. And furthermore, I come to realize that the new good book I am writing is also vulnerable to having the same fate as the last one. So I see that I am in a perpetual oblivion and resurgence journey in this game of writing Spirit books. I don't get to sit down and rest forever in having done it. I am propelled into an eternal restlessness and challenged to find my rest in this ever intensifying

reality.

“**How be I?**” is now my consuming question. How do I style my living so as to be at rest, at peace, in tranquility without retreating one iota from the full intensity of the actual living that is being demanded of me?

But instead of crafting a new answer to this profound question, I try to escape by **numbing** myself to the intensity being asked of me. Having numbed myself to the most profound dimension of my living, I find that I have numbed myself in a general way. I have certainly numbed myself to the Spirit dimension of my living. I may also have numbed myself psychologically and physically.

Having opted for numbness, I now find myself bored with the quality of my living. And in my boredom, I go **in search of excitement**. Perhaps I plunge into hard work. Perhaps I plunge into sensual excesses. Perhaps I ride actual or figurative roller coasters that make me think I am going to die and thus rev up some lust for living. Perhaps I try various drugs, orgies, weird experiments, risky ventures. Somewhere I hope I will find something exciting enough to take away the boredom that I myself have created by withdrawing from the actual terrors and glories of my real life.

D. H. Lawrence wrote a number of short poems on seeking for life that are surprisingly illuminating.

#### SEEKERS

O seekers, when you leave off seeking  
you will realize there was never anything to seek for.

You were only seeking to lose something  
not to find something,  
when you went forth so vigorously in search.

#### SEARCH FOR LOVE

Those that go searching for love  
only make manifest their own lovelessness.

and the loveless never find love,  
only the loving find love,  
and they never have to seek for it.<sup>4</sup>

Yes, and it is also true that those that go searching for excitement only make manifest their own boredom. And the bored never find excitement, only the excited find excitement and they never have to search for it. The scalding intensity of our own actual lives is the real excitement we are looking for. When we simply stop searching and surrender to that scalding intensity to which we have numbed ourselves, then genuine excitement returns.

A few good movies are coming out that express the experience of true tranquility. The film **American Beauty** depicts an abused youth who found tranquility in watching a paper sack dancing in the wind. He saw that his actual reality was not the serious game which his father played or the game he had to play to escape his father's wrath. Life is not serious in that sense. Life is playful. Life is a joyous possibility in the midst of all humanly imposed super-seriousness and all other sorts of phony numbness. It is possible to look life square in the face and still style your living as a tranquil dance. Such tranquility is the opposite of being numb. Most of the other characters in this film dramatize how we numb ourselves

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<sup>4</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (The Viking Press: 1964) page 661

with our withdrawals from real life and then find ourselves pursuing silly quests for excitement.

Also, in the movie **The Thin Red Line** one of the soldiers impressed the viewers as well as his cynical sergeant and others by finding “light” or “wonderland” in every here and now moment. Whether it was contemplating the indigenous people who had no interest in the war or contemplating the madness of the warring armies, or observing the world of nature, or sharing the agony of someone’s dying, this man was noticeably tranquil as well as realistically present. One of the great scenes of the movie occurred when this man, having led a platoon of Japanese soldiers away from his poorly positioned group found himself surrounded. Twenty or so Japanese soldiers were pointing guns at him from every direction. He stopped, looked them in the eyes, noticed the birds, smiled at their repeated attempts to terrify him, and accepted the bullets as he had accepted every other experience in the movie.

Watching such a movie as this, we can come to realize that our own personal living and our own personal dying could also be an expression of such tranquility. Perhaps we are stunned by such a movie because we realize that the many deaths and rebirths of our own lives are not being lived with such victorious tranquility. Perhaps such a movie beckons us to tranquil living by showing us that the tranquil person is not numb and that the tranquil person is not tortured by aversions and longings. The tranquil person is just there, just here, just now. Tranquility is nothing fancy, nothing beyond us. Tranquility is nothing rare and unlikely for us. Tranquility is just being here now--willingly **being here now**.

When I am tranquil, I am simply living in peace with the **hot fires** of Awe-filled living and sailing joyously the **wild seas** of actuality.

### **The Five Rows of Spirit Experience**

Now let us view the entire chart as one inseparable dynamic.

**Row one** describes the Infinite Reality that shines through every finite being and event. This Reality cracks the eggshell which is our sense of reality and thereby penetrates to our conscious center, bringing upset and challenge to that specific finite centering--to that operating personality and thus to that ego-center which identifies with that personality.

**Row two** describes the crisis that is felt by the ego center. This crisis is a crisis in our personal identity, or in our personal vocation, or in our personal style of living. It is felt as painful or dreadful because it is fracturing the existing personality. It is demanding our Spirit potentialities to surge forth and build a more adequate personality and a more adequate sense of reality. The finite human personality is constantly pained and challenged by the Infinite because it is a finite entity developed over the course of past events and subject to change throughout the time of our lives.

**Row three** describes the emergence of the Spirit Self asking about itself and about its action and style of living. Who am I? What do I? How be I?

**Row four** describes the dynamics of our flight or “fall” away from authenticity--a “fall” to which the Spirit Self is always tempted.

**Row five** describes the qualities of the Spirit Self that will be manifest if the deadly temptations in row four are resisted, avoided, or overcome. The fall into escape may seem



at first to be inevitable, but this fall can be avoided. There is no excuse for it. Being a Spirit Self does not mean evolving into a new species; it simply means surrendering to being the relationship with the Infinite that we are already constituted to be.

The intensities of being our Spirit Self will never cease to seem disquieting and challenging to our finite personality, but this disquieting and challenging option is actually the joyous choice. The other choice means living in despair--that is, attempting to escape from the Inescapable. Despair is the final hell of human living. Despair is despair because there is no escape from the Inescapable. So despair is a fragile state. Despair is only sustained in being by our own misguided choices to flee away from Actuality. If we would only turn around and face the Great Enemy of Actuality from whom we are fleeing, we would be immediately welcomed home to the land to our actual lives-- a land flowing with milk and honey, the land of tranquility. There are just two primal alternatives for human living: (1) the hell of futilely fleeing the Inescapable and (2) the heaven of accepting our Welcome Home to the actual Reality in which we are living.

Row four of the chart, **the fall from Spirit**, provides an illuminating way of understanding the Adam and Eve myth. Adam and Eve do not represent a form of humanity that is not yet Spiritually conscious. No, Adam and Eve are Spirit beings before the fall. As the myth says, the Infinite walks with them in their earthly garden. But when Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they are eating escape from being the Spirit beings they already are. "The knowledge of good and evil," as this phrase is being used in this myth, means having absolute certitude, a certitude that the myth indicates is appropriate only for God. Eating from this tree is desiring to be wise like God--to be absolutely certain what to do and what not to do. In reaching out for such certainty, Adam and Eve fall into profound illusion, the illusion that their cultural conditioning, their religion, their knowledge of good and evil, is absolute. Adam and Eve ate from the tree that was forbidden them in order to have ethical certainty and thus escape from the anxiety and the anguish of ambiguity which true Spirit freedom simply is. They ate certainty to become infinitely wise, but they thereby became spiritually stupid. Eating from this tree is to fall away from identifying with the actuality of our Spirit. It is to fall away from the vocation of acting out of our Spirit motivity. It is to fall away from the style of tranquilly being the Spirit we are in each living here and now.

When we are the fallen ones, we are estranged from our Spirit potentialities. This estrangement is not a return to prehuman animal existence. It is a fall into post-human Spirit perversion.

And this fall has nothing to do with any naturally emergent level of human development. Our natural human bodies, minds and centering dynamics remain intact, but these finite processes are now being operated by a fallen Spirit being. This Spirit fallenness can create pathologies of a physical, mental, or personality type. Our Spirit fallenness can even create pathologies in the animal pets and domesticated animals that live among we fallen humans. But the origin of this fall is human; and it is accomplished by persons who in their essence are Spirit beings.

Because the temptation to fall never goes away, being our Spirit potentials is always a choice. Freedom is an aspect of the Spirit Self. Freely choosing to be Freedom is an ongoing aspect of being our Spirit potentialities.

The corollary of being this Freedom is perpetually facing the temptation to choose to abandon Freedom, to escape from Spirit being. And when the human falls from Spirit, he or she falls also from Freedom. We enter into a bondage--a state of living in which the

Freedom that is responsible for the bondage has been lost.

The Spirit Self, when it enters into self-created bondage, cannot rescue itself from the bondage it has created. The Spirit Self operates like a switch that our Spirit freedom can turn off but then cannot turn back on. Rather, fallen Spirit must be rescued by the Infinite Actor in row one of the chart above. This action (the external situation of row one) starts again the Spirit dynamic of row two (internal crisis) and of row three (profound Spirit questions). And this brings us back again to the living crisis of choosing between rows four and five--the choice to **escape** indicated in row four or to **live the Reality-constituted Spirit qualities** indicated in row five.

Søren Kierkegaard has been one of our era's clearest observers of the Spirit Self. He pictures Spirit as a relationship with the Eternal, a relationship between the finite and the Infinite. I, when I am being my Spirit Self, **am this relationship**. The Spirit Self is not the finite personality, and the Spirit Self is not the Infinite. The Spirit Self is a "third term," a relationship between the finite and the Infinite. Furthermore, Kierkegaard says that this relationship has the capacity to take a relationship to itself. It can willingly be itself, or it can be unwilling to be itself. There are many ways in which both of these two primal choices can be made.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard goes on to point out that this relationship (our Spirit Being) is not constituted by the personality or by the Spirit Self. This relationship is constituted by the Infinite. If I am in rebellion from being my Spirit Self, I am in rebellion against the Infinite which is constituting me a Spirit Self. This rebellion can be carried out in many ways. Some of these ways can be called "weak," for they entail retreating into unconsciousness of being a Spirit Being. Weak Spirit can also mean being intensely conscious of being my despairing Spirit but then hiding this despairing Spirit in some secret interior place and allowing no exterior expression of this dreadful secret to break the surface of my introverted cocoon. Spirit rebellion can also be carried out in ways that can be called "strong." The rebelling Spirit person can fabricate a strong self which outwardly expresses its Spirit rebellion. This entails forgetting that the Spirit Self is constituted by the Infinite and instead taking credit for constituting my own strong self. But this strong self which I myself have constituted is only another finite self and thus a fragile self which can with one choice of this strong self be resolved into nothingness. Kierkegaard calls all these states of Spirit rebellion "despair." They are despair because they are opposing that Infinite Reality that cannot be successfully opposed. My rebellion, however extreme, cannot change the actuality that the Spirit strength with which I rebel is constituted by the Infinite. Spirit rebellion is an attempt to escape the Inescapable, to flee that to which I am inextricably bound, and thus Spirit rebellion is inherently hopeless. I am thus in despair. And despair, so defined, is very widespread. The widespread actuality of despair is clouded by the fact that the typical despairer is either unconscious of his or her despair or is strongly denying that his or her particular form of futile rebellion is despair.

On the other hand, if I am not rebelling against being this inescapable relationship between the finite me and the Infinite, then I am surrendering to being the Spirit being that I am constituted to be. This, says Kierkegaard, is Spirit health.

For those who identify themselves as Christians or wish to dialogue with healthy Christianity, I end this discussion with the following suggestions for decoding the code language of classical Christian theology.

On the above "What is Spirit?" chart:

**Row one** is God the Almighty Parent.  
**Row two** is the human experience of this God.  
**Row three** is the dawn of Holy Spirit asking about itself.  
**Row four** is the fall of Spirit into sin.  
**Row five** is Holy Spirit being Holy Spirit.

And finally we might ask, “Where on this chart is Jesus, the Christ?” Consider the **line between row four and five**. On this line takes place those healing events that bring us from the bondage of sin into the new life of trust, freedom, and compassion. In good Christian theology, such healing events are called “grace,” “the dawn of our welcome home to the Reign of God,” “the encounter with Jesus as the advent of our essential humanity (our Messianic humanity) calling us to step down from our safe boats of escape and walk on the wild and living waters of our actual lives.”

## Poem two: The Reappearance of God

Sometime last century, or was it the century before, all Supreme Beings died.  
The whole realm of super-ordinary goings-on died.  
Only the ordinary lived on.

But human beings,  
uncomfortable with changes of this magnitude,  
reinvented Supreme Beings,  
knowing that they did so,  
knowing that Supreme Beings were a human invention.

Unconsciously, as unconsciously as possible,  
human beings knew they were worshiping their own inventions,  
but they did not care.  
Human beings wanted to worship themselves anyhow.

Meanwhile, GOD, who is not a Supreme Being,  
who is not a human invention,  
who is not human in any way whatsoever,  
who is not even known or knowable by human beings,  
became known again by human beings,  
known as the unknown,  
the real unknown,  
the UNKNOWN, UNKNOWN.

GOD, not standing above, but shining through  
every natural being,  
every space-time event,  
every cosmological transformation,  
every personal transformation,  
every social transformation,  
GOD became visible once again.

Visible but not known.  
Seen but not understood.  
Present but not controlled.  
Unavoidable but not named.

Humanity, those who faced this fully,  
found themselves affirmed by this,  
ennobled by this,  
healed by this,  
refreshed by this,  
enabled to be themselves by this.

Humanity was  
Oh Yes,  
brought down  
    but brought down from an uncomfortable high horse  
    brought down to be a completely ordinary organism--  
    vulnerable, dependent, passing--  
and yet,  
nevertheless,  
being conscious  
of the SHINING THROUGH  
of GOD.

## Discourse three:

# “God” as a Relationship Word

In the previous discourse I suggested that in a proper understanding of the Christian vocabulary “God, the Almighty Parent” points to **The Infinite Void, the Infinite Fullness, and the Infinitely Total Demand** to live our lives in an open relationship with this **Void** and this **Fullness**.

This assertion is in strong contradiction to the popular view among Christian-identified people. And that popular view has a very strong hold on the minds of both Christians and non-Christians. This popular view is so strong that it seems sometimes almost impossible to counter it.

What is this popular view? People generally believe that “God” in the Christian sense means some sort of actual Person, Spirit, or Power occupying some sort of “space” beyond this cosmos and interfering in the “natural” course of things at “special” moments. Why does this view have such a grip on people’s imagination?

### **The Grip of Supernatural Literalism**

One reason why this popular view of the Christian God has such a hold on so many people is that this view is being used to avoid making a thoroughgoing affirmation of our actual lives. Our natural suffering, struggling, changing, dying, and resurging lives are thought to be unworthy of us or insufficient for us; so we hope to secure some help from “above” to make things better. Or we hope for another entire life in some other “place.” Surely this meager life that we have cannot be all that there is. Surely the wonderful person that I have become does not deserve to simply pass away. Instead of pushing through our shallow attachments to our finite relationships and discovering that Spirit relationship which is the depth of our existence, we, as misguided “souls,” hope instead for some magical Someone to come and save us from our finite plights.

This view of God and religion, Karl Marx dubbed “the opium of the people.” And this is an apt characterization. Such a view of religion is like an addictive drug; it is a means of escape from freedom and responsibility, from compassion and true action, from sober realism and clear thinking.

Some secular humanists, who for themselves reject the crass supernatural theism of popular Christianity, nevertheless allow that it might be adequate for others who are not as strong as they are. How contemptuous! How arrogant to believe that any of us are stronger in this way than anyone else! No, the popular view of Christianity is an addictive and destructive perversion for anyone and everyone, and it is rightly ridiculed by every honest atheist.

Still, there are those who argue that a literal interpretation of religious myth, though inadequate for them personally, is nevertheless a valid stage of religious development through which humanity has passed and through which modern people should be permitted to pass. Some Christian educators have suggested that it is proper to raise our children as literalists and then enlighten them later. But this perspective is profoundly misguided. Both secular and religious thinkers are correct to claim that literalism in religious interpretation is a perversion, an ignorance, a stupidity about the entire Spirit dimension of human existence.

Spirit escapism is not the only reason why people are inclined to take religious myth literally rather than metaphorically. Confusion about the entire subject of religious expression also plays its role. All of us have been trained to think literally by the methodologies of modern science. Many secular and religious persons have concluded that we must believe statements literally or not at all. Many also claim that Jesus, Paul, Mark, Amos, Isaiah, and the other Biblical writers surely meant what they said in a literal fashion. I insist that anyone who thinks that the biblical writers were literalists has not read these writings carefully.

It is true that the biblical writers and Christian theologians through the centuries have used the two-story metaphor, the transcendence metaphor, for talking about their Spirit experience. But this does not mean that all these Christian luminaries used the transcendence metaphor literally. So what exactly is this two-story metaphor? What does it mean to use a religious metaphor to express our Spirit experience? And when and how and why did it come to pass that human beings began to use the religious metaphors of the Christian tradition literally?

### **The Old Metaphor of Transcendence and Immanence**

When we speak of God as transcendent, we are using the two-story religious metaphor. We are assuming a “place” above or beyond this ordinary place in which God, a Being of some sort, can transcend this world. When we speak of God as immanent, we mean that God is “with us” or active in our world. Transcendence and immanence are not opposing pictures of God, but two parts of the same picture. God must **transcend** the ordinary world in order to be in a “place” from which this God can become **immanent** in the ordinary world.

For example, when we speak of “God:” as “the Creator” of “the creation” we are using the two-story religious metaphor. We are picturing in our minds an abode where this “Creator” dwells and we are seeing in our minds eye this “Divine Person” speak or move hands in an action that creates the creation. The books of the Bible and most Christian theology is so immersed in the use of this metaphor that we may not even notice it as a metaphor. And we have to pause long and hard in order to consider that this metaphor might be obsolete and that some other metaphor might be more adequate for our times.

But first of all, we need to face up to the presence of this old metaphor in the common mind of our culture and to the fact that this two-story picture is a metaphor, a finite construct of the human mind not an “eternal truth” passed down from “above.”

When we say that God is a sovereign Lord or King we are using our experience of an earthly political leader as an analogy or metaphor for something more profound. We are saying something like this: “Suppose that whatever it is that rules over all of nature and history is like a King.” Or it could be like a “Father.” Or like a “Mother.” In any case we are thinking metaphorically. With the human senses, no one has examined this “place” where the Sovereign over all things “dwells.” No one has evidence of a scientific sort whether this sovereign King is a good King or an evil monster. All statements about God using the transcendence metaphor depend for their meaningfulness upon some sort of personal experience which resonates with these fictitious stories.

Some theologians say they want to stop talking about God as transcendent and simply talk of God as immanent within the events of the cosmos. But the ancient users of the transcendence metaphor always talked about God as immanent. Immanence and

transcendence are two parts of the same metaphor. If the idea of immanence is used apart from transcendence, then one is actually saying that the finite cosmos and God are the same reality. Such usage eliminates from consideration any “relationship with the Infinite.” In this immanence-only usage, we have nothing more than relationships with the finite cosmos, and we are calling those relationships “Divine.”

The image of transcendence had a profound meaning for those who, through the centuries, used this metaphor in a meaningful fashion. It meant that finite relationships did not fully describe the whole of human experience. This is still true to our experience today: in addition to our finite relationships, we also experience Awe in relation to the Infinite--that is, to the Wholeness of Being, The Brahman, the Tao, the Wanka Takan, or whatever name we give the Infinite.

Recovering the wisdom of our religious heritages cannot be accomplished by simply abandoning the transparency metaphor; we must replace it with a metaphor that is more adequate to our era. And such a metaphor is already in use. It goes by many names. I call it “the transparency metaphor.”

### **Transparency, the Emerging Metaphor**

A piece of glass through which you see more reality than the glass itself is the basic image that constitutes the transparency metaphor. It is as if I am looking at a particular tree when suddenly this tree turns to glass and I see the Infinite Wholeness that is constituting this tree and that is assigning this tree to one day pass away. I do not cease to see the tree. I simply see through it. I do not look in some different direction. I do not look at something else. I keep looking at the tree but I see more than the tree. I see through it.

Here is another way to illustrate the transparency metaphor. Suppose we imagine that before the Big Bang there was just Infinite Silence. Suppose we imagine that this same Infinite Silence is still present, that the Infinite Silence is **speaking** to us through each and every event. I wrote the following poem to express this:

The Infinite Silence Speaks  
through every rustle of tree leaves,  
through every singing bird,  
through every sound of any kind,  
and through the silent spaces between the sounds.

The Infinite Silence is Void and Darkness  
but also Fullness, a dazzling backlight that shines through  
every gleaming tree, every shimmering squirrel  
and surrounds every human being  
with a halo.

When I spoke earlier of God as “**the Infinite Void, the Infinite Fullness, and the Total Demand**,” I was using the transparency metaphor. I was talking about an actual experience that a human being can have through all his or her experiences of oblivion, resurgence, and tranquility. In each and every moment of life there is an immense nest of finite relationships and there is also that Infinite relatedness that gives our life its unity, that “holds all things together.” We can say that this Infinite Presence is constituting all our finite relationships and assigning all finite relationships to pass away. Such an experience of God is not always present to my or your consciousness, but it could, in principle, be present in each and every

moment. It is actually inescapable, even though we are very good at escaping it.

But does this transparency mode of experiencing God illuminate the Christian Bible and Christian tradition or is that heritage so dependent upon the transcendence metaphor that Christianity simply passes away with the passing of the transcendence metaphor? Some take the latter view. I do not. I insist that we can translate accurately from the transcendence metaphor to the transparency metaphor and that such a translation provides each of us with a genuine opportunity to experience the Bible and Christian tradition coming alive in a fresh way.

### **The Benefits of Biblical Worship**

Let me illustrate one useful method for working with the Bible. Simply insert into the text in place of the word “God” the words “**Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand.**” Consider Psalm 103 in this light:

Bless the **Infinite Void**,  
Bless the **Infinite Fullness**,  
Bless the **Infinately Total Demand**,  
Bless the **Infinite**  
my soul.

My innermost heart, bless the Awesome reputation of  
the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand.**

Bless the **Infinite** my soul  
and forget none of the benefits  
that the **Infinite** bestows upon us.

The **Infinite**  
pardons all my guilt  
and heals all my suffering.

I want to interrupt the Psalm at this point and reflect on these two benefits:

- (1) pardons all my guilt and
- (2) heals all my suffering.

With regard to the first benefit, it must simply be said that in no other relationship is all my guilt pardoned. In my relationship with my nation, all my violations are not pardoned. In my relationship with my parents, all my violations are not pardoned. In my relationship with my spouse, all my violations are not pardoned. In my relationship with my children, all my violations are not pardoned. And so on. But in my relationship with the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand** all my guilt is pardoned. This is just simply true. This is not a mere intellectual statement with no verification in experience. I am actually, always “Welcomed Home” to my relationship with the **Infinite Void** and **Infinite Fullness**. I am welcomed back to the **Total Demand** of living the full intensity of my life.

With regard to the second benefit, I have to ask first, “How does my suffering need healing? I didn’t know my suffering was sick.” The fact that life has its ups and downs is not a sickness. And my down-experiences are not a mistreatment. My “downs” are just healthy suffering. Sick suffering is despairing over the fact that life has its ups and downs. So returning to my relationship with the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total**



**Demand** is going to heal all my suffering. That is one of the benefits of such “worship” where “worship” means “blessing” the **Infinite**. “Worship” means affirmation, loyalty, trust, joy in the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**.

Let us continue with some more lines from this Psalm:

The **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**  
rescues me from the pit of death  
and surrounds me with constant love, with tender affection;

The **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**  
contents me with all good in the prime of life  
and my youth is ever new like an eagle's.

. . . . .

The **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**  
has not treated us as our sins deserve  
nor requited us for our misdeeds.  
For as the heaven is high above the earth,  
so huge is the strong love of the **Infinite** toward all who dread  
(that is, worship) the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**.  
As far as the east is from the west  
so far has the **Infinite**  
put our offenses always from us.  
As a parent has compassion for his or her children  
so has the **Infinite** compassion for all who dread  
(that is worship) the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**.

The **Infinite** knows how we were made  
knows full well that we are dust.  
A human being's days are like the grass.  
Humans blossom like the flowers of the field;  
a wind passes over them, and they cease to be  
and their place knows them no more.

But the love of the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**  
never fails those who dread (that is, worship)  
the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**.

Likewise the **Infinite** never fails all future generations  
who listen to the voice of the **Infinite Silence**,  
who keep covenant with the **Infinite Fullness**,  
and who remember the commandments of the **Total Demand**  
and obey them.

And the **Infinite** has rulership  
over all happenings in the entire cosmos.

Bless the **Infinite** all messengers of the **Infinite**,  
creatures who do the bidding of the **Infinite**.  
Bless the **Infinite** all invisible forces,  
ministers who serve the will of the **Infinite**.

Bless the **Infinite** all created things  
in every place where the **Infinite** has dominion.

Bless the **Infinite**  
my soul.

At its inception there was passion in this poetry. This Psalm has been profoundly moving to hundred of generations, and it can be so again. This Psalm is about finding the central meaning of our entire lives. It is about finding our direction, our path, our devotion--namely, making the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand** our "God," our "worship," the **REALITY** which we "bless."

This Psalm demonstrates how the Bible uses the concept "God" in a twofold manner. On the one hand, "God" means an externally present Mysterious Reality. I have indicated that Reality with the phrase "**Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand.**" And on the other hand, the term "God" is used as a relationship word: my object of worship, my devotion, that which I bless as the meaning or center of my life. Just as I might say that Joyce is "my sweetheart," so the biblical author can say that this Mysterious Infinite Presence is "my God" and by that mean "my object of worship"--the passion, the ultimate concern, the loyalty that gives my life its meaning. The entire 103rd Psalm is about worshipping the Infinite. "Bless the **Infinite**, my soul." This request made of my own soul means that my soul (which I usually call Spirit) is always confronted with other options--namely, not blessing this dreadful **Infinity** that renders me finite and challenges me to live an intensely alert life. Not blessing the Infinite means nothing less than fleeing away from my authenticity into some form of illusion.

Every Psalm, in fact the entire Bible, is about dialogue with the Infinite or about dialogue among humans about their dialogue with the Infinite. Psalm 103 is about a dialogue with my Spirit-self about the quality of my dialogue with the Infinite. **Dialogical relationship with the Infinite is a fundamental metaphor not only of the Psalms but of the entire Bible.**

And let us be clear about any and all slippage into literalism. This "**Otherness**" with "whom" this dialogue is conducted is not a fictitious personage living in some alien realm. The **Other** is a real **Presence** within each and every human encounter. And this **Other** must not be confused with the wind of Spirit that blows through the human person. Within the biblical literature, the Spirit-wind (the Spirit-I) comes into being through encounter with this **Other** and through response to this **Other** in the real events of everyday life. The Spirit-wind is the relationship of encounter and response with the **Infinite Void, Infinite Fullness, and Total Demand**. This Spirit-wind is constituted by the Infinite and can even be said to be the **Infinite** blowing in our lives, but the Spirit-wind is not synonymous with the **Infinite Source** of that wind.

Hindu mysticism has said, "**THAT OTHER I AM.**" But not the Bible. The Bible says, "**THAT OTHER** I encounter, and then I respond to **THAT OTHER**, and then **THAT OTHER** responds to me." Once this dialogical imagery has fully taken hold of our thinking, it is impossible to view the Biblical writings in any other way. These writings do not make sense when viewed as speaking of a mystical absorption or as speculation about a literal Super Person who can interfere with the natural course of life. The Bible over and over witnesses to an everyday experience of **THAT OTHERNESS, THAT INFINITE PRESENCE** that is streaming towards us in and through each and every natural or social event.

The Bible does, however, use the transcendence religious metaphor. It does picture two

realms: the above and the below--the abode of the Creator and the natural creation. But we twenty-first century, scientifically trained, and existentially alert humans can now see something that the biblical writers did not see and did not need to see, namely that their two-story thinking is metaphorical thinking as opposed to scientific thinking. The biblical writers did not make this distinction. They were not modern scientists, and they had no qualms about using two-story mythology to express their experiences. Myth for them was not an obsolete rational system nor a cryptic code that had to be decoded. Myth, for them, was just a normal way of talking with which they were quite comfortable. Mythic expressions were used by everyone, and everyone knew intuitively that mythic talk was probing deeper than ordinary talk.

It is we, not the biblical communities, who find mythic talk problematical. We make mythic expressions problematical by attempting to take myth literally or by assuming that the biblical writers took myth literally. Even when we admit that myth is some sort of art or poetry rather than experimental fact, we continue to create misunderstandings for ourselves by thinking of myth as a mode of rational clarification rather than seeing it as wild audacious poetry expressing actual, concrete, personal experiences of Awe.

We have the same personal experiences today, but we express them differently. When we want to talk about our experience of the **Mysterious Wholeness** that is **Present** in each and every natural and social event, we do not automatically speak of Gods and Goddesses or of the One God doing this or that. We can, however, speak quite naturally about being **Awed** by the **Awesome**, or confronting an **Infinite Void** out of which all has come and into which all is returning. We might quite easily speak of an **Infinite Fullness** which connects and holds all things together and overwhelms us with new wisdoms and possibilities. We might even speak, as I have done, of that **Total Demand** upon our profound freedom to be the Spirit beings that we are. But we simply do not feel automatically inclined to talk about these things with images of Gods and Goddesses, angels and devils, heaven and hell, and so forth. When we bring these old metaphorical images into our contemporary conversation, we have to translate them into the modes of personal expression that are working for us in our era.

The above discussion has immense implications for Christian theology and for sharing the gifts of the Christian heritage with others within these times. It means that we must not use the word "God" without clarifying carefully that we are not using this word to indicate a literal personal being in a next-door superworld.

Furthermore, to communicate the biblical vision we must also discredit those sophisticated Christian, Jewish, and Moslem theologians who have made "God" into an inclusive idea that makes sense of everything. "God" is, of course, an idea, but not an idea that makes sense of things. The word "God," used in the Christian sense, points to **THAT** which never makes sense. This word points to the **Mystery**, the **Enigma** that frustrates as well as undergirds all our sense-making. God, in the Christian sense, is not an idea that makes sense. The Reality of God is that complete **NONSENSE** or **ENIGMA** that makes **Awe**, not sense.

And "God" in the Bible is also a relationship word. I, as a true follower of the biblical lineage, am witnessing that the **NONSENSICAL**, **ENIGMATIC**, Awe-filling **MYSTERIOUS** is **my God**.