

Care for Community: Stories of a Relational Spirit

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Ask me about God, and I'd have to say that I don't really know. However, I have settled for using the word God as convenient shorthand. Of course, I have degendered the word, and de-anthropomorphised it (that is, I don't see God as a human figure).

God represents for me a mystery, a mysterious spirit, presence, power, that we can sense sometimes when a special moment comes upon us. It could happen in Meeting for Worship, in the bush, by the sea, in an encounter that brings relationship, haring or making music, in fact engaging in any creative activity.

Then somehow we know that there is something beyond ourselves that we mysteriously respond to and feel part of. This sense of knowing without really knowing is what delights and sustains me. There might be special moment at any time.

Phyllis Short 2002,
Quaker Faith and Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, 3.17

Introduction

There's a beautiful area of native bush in the central North Island called Ohinetonga Scenic reserve. Niwa and I camped nearby in Owhango during a recent holiday and explored the bush each day. The many massive rimu, tawa, matai and kahikatea are an imposing presence. Some of these trees have stood there for more than 500 years and as I spent time with them, I imagined the comings and goings of many human generations they had witnessed over their lifetimes. These encounters with giants in the bush elicited a palpable sense of awe and wonder and I realised I had no sense of awe and wonder for the image humans have used to try and explain what might have created these giants. As I reflected on that, it occurred to me that whilst humans have worshipped such an image, they have continued to destroy trees at an alarming rate.

This experience in the bush highlighted that in my thinking, I had moved away from the idea of the separation of the sacred from the natural world, a dualism that has been characteristic of Western Christianity. I realised this was another step on a path I had been following for some time. This paper is a description of some of the steps on that path.

I had long been uncomfortable with the idea of worshipping an image, which creates other problems as well. Karen Armstrong suggests, such worship can become a form of idolatry.

Idolatry has always been one of the pitfalls of monotheism. Because its chief symbol of the divine was a personalised deity, there was an inherent danger that people would imagine 'him' as a larger, more powerful version of themselves, which they could use to endorse their own practices, loves and hatreds – sometimes to lethal effect. There can only be one absolute, so once a finite idea, theology, nation, polity or ideology is made supreme, it is compelled to destroy anything that opposes it. (Armstrong, p. 308)

There can be substantial implications then, of using this image God. The question for me however, has been "If I reject the 'personalised deity' symbol, how do I 'imagine' God to be?" As I have progressed on this pathway, I have also had frequent "attacks of atheism" as Nancy Bieber describes it (Bieber, p 41).

An early step on my path and one of the things that kept me 'in the fold', was interestingly, a development in management and leadership theory rather than any religious literature (of which I read very little until recently). During my time as a manager, I had seen the rise of interest in leadership qualities beyond simply rational intelligence. Selection for management in the early days of the discipline, had focussed very much on the traditional intelligence test. Research however, progressively revealed that highly intelligent people did not necessarily make good leaders and that there was another dimension to good leadership centred on the ability to build relationships. This required a different dimension that became known as emotional intelligence, and selection for management and leadership roles began to include various personality and other tests to ascertain the level of such intelligence.

Ongoing research in the 1990s then began to identify a third element that was critical to organisational success. Not only did leaders need to develop smart strategy (rational intelligence) and build strong collegial and staff relationships (emotional intelligence), but there was a third element that galvanised effective action, and that was a sense of organisational purpose, meaning and contribution. The skill needed to instil this element became known as spiritual intelligence.

Zohar and Marshall, the theorists who developed the concept define spiritual intelligence as "the intelligence with which we access our deepest meanings, values, purposes, and highest motivations." (Zohar and Marshall, p. 3)

They are very careful to distinguish this form of intelligence from religious belief. In doing so they suggest that it was broader than religious spirituality and needed to:

...draw on deeper, non-sectarian meanings, values, purposes and motivations that might be sacred to any human being...Spiritual intelligence is our moral intelligence, giving us an innate ability to distinguish right from wrong. It is the intelligence with which we exercise goodness, truth, beauty and compassion in our lives. It is, if you like, the soul's intelligence, if you think of soul as that channelling capacity in human beings that brings things up from the deeper and richer dimensions of imagination and spirit into our daily lives, families, organisations, and institutions. (p.3)

It struck me as highly significant that in the secular world of management theory and research, there was recognition of a human capacity that transcended the physical, rational, and emotional, a capacity that had traditionally been the preserve of (or captured by), the institution of religion. Furthermore, this capacity was seen as providing humans with the foundation of values and motivations that enabled them to build communities of effective cooperation by inspiring with meaning and purpose. In the organisational context such cooperative endeavour to achieve common purpose was critical to success.

Another step on my path was the liberation I experienced when I finally understood the idea that the Bible needs to be approached as a collection of stories, or as "mythos" rather than "logos", as Karen Armstrong would describe it in her book, *The Case for God*. The Bible does include some history which complicates things, but much of it is composed of stories and metaphors used by the writers to illustrate often difficult concepts and values. Applying a test of historical or scientific 'truth' (logos) to the stories is as irrelevant as with a Shakespeare novel, the meanings and power of which we understand and absorb whilst accepting it as fiction. We know for example that Iago is a fictional character but through him we are led to understand the nature of personal power, control and jealousy.

Evidently, I had always been influenced by the "fact fundamentalism" that Armstrong says characterised the period of human cultural evolution called modernity. This view held that if something can't be proved scientifically then it doesn't exist, which is the mode in which much of the God debate has unfolded. It was during the period of modernity that Newton and others were convinced that the existence of God would soon be proved scientifically, but of course, for the first time this opened the way for the opposite idea, that the existence of God could be disproved, an idea called atheism. For a time, I would have described myself as atheist, in part because I was approaching the religious stories in the logos mode.

The idea of reading the Bible as mythos was liberating for me because it led to an exploration of other ways of conceptualising and describing the underlying meanings that the Bible stories were designed to explain. Centrally, what were other ways to conceptualise what is presented in many parts of the Bible as the personalised and all-powerful creator and controller called God?

As I continued my exploration I came across Buber's work, which opened an entirely new way of thinking about God. Central to this thinking was the idea of what I call a relational rather than a personal God.

Buber's idea

The Buber idea is that God is encountered in the I-Thou connections person to person and person to nature, rather than being a separate "thing" that we experience as individuals in an I-It manner. He goes even further in emphasising the relational nature of God by suggesting that rather than residing separately in each person or in nature, the spirit is actually in the connection itself, i.e., **between** rather than within each. Buber illustrates this by contrasting

the blood that flows within the person and the air that is between and shared by people and the rest of nature. He likens Spirit to love, and references John's gospel in which God is described as love. "Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love...Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content,' its object; but love is *between I and Thou*." (Buber, p. 14-15).

I find this particularly helpful as it shifts the focus from Spirit or God as some "thing" that a person experiences and which guides them individually to the Truth, to a focus on encountering Spirit in the connections, where truths emerge from sensing the Spirit through communication and interaction between people. I find it interesting that the word "spirit" is a Middle English noun derived from the Latin word "spiritus" meaning a breathing. It seems premodern scholars understood the nature of spirit better than those who came after them.

Buber was influenced by Feuerbach, a nineteenth century anthropologist whose view according to Geering, was "...that the essence of what it means to be human is not found in the individual human being but in the personal relation which exists between two human beings. He made the point that just as it takes two human beings to procreate the physical individual, so it requires at least two human beings to bring forth the spiritual component of what it means to be human. Only by communication and dialogue between person and person do ideas arise and they are subsequently tested in the apprehension of truth." (Geering, p. 15)

If one can know God only by entering the I-Thou mode of mutual relation, community, which provides the opportunities for relation and through that for ideas to arise and be tested, is fundamental. This is probably why, when denied community, human mental health suffers as we are currently seeing due to Covid isolation requirements that have kept children away from school for extended periods and limited social interaction of the population generally.

Biblical references

There are frequent references in the Bible that also point to, or could be interpreted as, a relational view of God. Foremost of these for me is the account in Mathew, of Jesus reassuring his disciples that after his imminent death, he would still be available to them. "For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them." (Mathew 18:20) This speaks to me of the presence of the Spirit being manifest only when "two or three" are present, or in other words only in the relation itself. Further, "two or three" I take to mean simply any more than one. This again emphasises the critical importance of community, which is a network of relationships.

Richard Foster in his book *Celebration of Discipline the Path to Spiritual Growth* takes this further and suggests that Jesus as quoted in Mathew, was teaching the disciples that "...they, too, could hear the heaven-sent voice and most clearly when together." (Foster, p. 226).

Other references in the Bible that point to the relational nature of God include:

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us. (1 John 4:11)

Yet God is actually not far from any one of us; as someone has said, 'In him we live and move and exist.'...Since we are God's children, we should not suppose his

nature is anything like an image of gold silver or stone, shaped by the art and skill of man. (Acts 17:27-29)

These all suggest a God who is in between, in the connections between the I and Thou rather than being a God out there, a God that individuals experience personally. For me this also suggests that truth (whatever that means) is “heard most clearly when together” to use Foster’s words. Rather than a personal God who nurtures, teaches and guides the individual to the truth, it is in connecting with others in community that we are nurtured and can approach truth for that community at that time.

On the other hand, community can also be a deadening influence, curbing individual inspiration and leadings rather than fostering them. It is a matter of striving for the right balance and effective processes of truly spirit-led community discernment are critical. This is a matter beyond the scope of this paper but is one that I addressed in my paper “*Individual Infallibility and Community Discernment*”

A Quaker perspective

The idea of a relational God is consistent with my understanding of the Quaker idea of Meeting for Worship, which emphasises the corporate rather than individual, meditative nature of worship. The idea of spirit-led decisions emerging from the “gathered” Meeting for Worship for Business is another example of relational rather than individualist thinking. Quaker discernment is an exercise in seeking the leadings of the Spirit in the connections in community, through which truths emerge for that community for that time. The Quaker mystical tradition has also always emphasised the path of engagement rather than withdrawal from community in the search for “Truth”.

Furthermore, the Quaker idea that all of life is sacramental has taken on new meaning for me as I have thought about the implications of a relational spirit. A sacrament has been described as “a means through which the spirit is experienced” (Borg, p. 31) and in many churches, sacraments became ritualised observances on particular occasions. Quakers have always rejected this ritualisation and believed that all of life was sacramental and the Spirit could be experienced even in the most mundane tasks of everyday life.

Our experience leads us to emphasise the fact that entrance into the community of Christ’s people requires no outward rite, but is to be known only through trust, obedience, love, and commitment. As these are brought forth in us, we find ourselves drawn together into a unity with one another in which the presence of the Spirit of God is realised.

(Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends, 210)

From a Buber perspective, the tasks of everyday life can be carried out in mindful ways so they become more than simply I-It experiences. There is a difference in quality between ‘going through the motions’ and acting with awareness of the task, the others involved in the task, the environment and one’s place in this network or community of endeavour.

There are also challenges within traditional Quaker and Christian thinking to the idea of a relational God. Since reading Margery Post-Abbott’s book *Walk Humbly, Serve Boldly: Modern Quakers as Everyday Prophets*, one that has exercised me particularly is the challenge raised by the prophetic tradition. What struck me about the book was its strong individualistic emphasis. Post-Abbott quotes one of her correspondents as follows:

For prophetic ministry to be a reality, the person sharing must have faith that whatever they intend to share is a message from God and they are just vessels being

used to deliver the message; prepare the message in accordance with God's will and believe that the Lord will accomplish the rest.

Similar notions appear throughout the book and whilst Post-Abbott does mention the role of the Quaker community, it is mostly seen as a check or test of these clear and strong individual leadings.

I have difficulty with this prophetic tradition based as it is, on the idea that individual prophets are given their messages by an object or power called God and become "vessels" for conveying those messages to the community. Armstrong's caution that I began with is worth repeating, "there was an inherent danger that people would imagine 'him' as a larger, more powerful version of themselves, which they could use to endorse their own practices".

When I offer ministry, I certainly feel 'moved to speak' or inspired but I am too well aware of my fallibilities and know that I can miscue things. I offer the ministry in the hope it may 'speak to others' condition', not with confidence that it is a message from God.

For me the prophetic tradition contributes to the cult of the individual and I wonder whether it is one of the underpinnings of the individualism of Western cultures.

Māori perspective

In *Care For the Planet: Toward a Quaker Story* I mentioned learning from a book by Alison Jones that in the Māori worldview, it is in the relationships "where everything happens, where there is energy of all sorts." In her book *Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa*, Georgina Tuari Stewart provides more detail on this idea and says that Māori views of the universe and the place of humans within it "centre on whakapapa, a word whose nearest English equivalent is 'genealogy'" (Stewart, p. 59). This genealogical model of the universe is in essence a relational rather than individualistic view of human existence. Humans are all connected by their whakapapa links to the Gods in the origin stories, the Gods of the skies, the earth, the forests, the rivers and the seas.

Stewart translates whakapapa as "to make layers" or in other words "generative", through the combination of 'whaka-' meaning to make and 'papa' meaning ground or layer (p. 85) and she says:

Whakapapa is a master concept of the Māori world view and key to understanding Indigenous Māori views of the natural and social worlds, and guiding right ethical relationships between people, and between humans and other living and non-living things... Whakapapa is rather like each person being a knot within a large and ever-expanding metaphorical fishing net of connections, in contrast with the modern economic view of individuals as more like single unbonded atoms of an inert gas, freely moving at random within their physical limits (p. 85).

Stewart then links several other Māori concepts that reinforce the relational nature of Māori world views including whanaungatanga and aroha. Whanaungatanga she says, "is made by adding the suffix 'tanga' (equivalent of -ship) to 'whanaunga' meaning relation, which in turn derives from whānau or family (both nuclear and extended). Whilst its specific meaning derives from whānau, she says it "is more generally used meaning 'relationships' as an ethical principle derived from whakapapa, to guide decisions in our interactions with other people in our communities, workplaces and so on."

Stewart explains aroha as being comprised of two parts, aro and hā: "aro (attend to, incline to, follow)...while hā means the breath, a partial synonym for hau. Aroha literally means to follow the breath, which implies attentive care and empathy for self and other: to follow one's

heart; go with the flow.” (Stewart, p92) The similarity with the Latin derivation of spirit as breath, I find fascinating.

Fundamental to Māori culture then are concepts and ideas of relationship and connection not only within the living human community but with ancestors right back to the Gods. As Jones says, the energy is in these connections.

Implications

In summary, having long questioned the idea of God as an all-powerful creator and controller, my conception has also shifted away from the personal God who is my guide and teacher, to God as a relational Spirit, whose strength is sensed and made manifest in encounters with the other, whether other as person, or the rest of the natural world of which people are an inextricable part.

There are two important implications of this perspective. First it is strongly oriented toward the collective and the relational rather than the individual and second it is dynamic in that it is interactive which stimulates learning and continuing “revelation” by confronting us with the different views of others.

This shift I find helps us to focus on the collective. We learn and change not by isolating ourselves and seeking individual inspiration in some sort of vacuum, but by engaging with others, whether in person or through others’ writings and other recordings. Everything we know and understand is a product of this collective process. We are vessels carrying the combined learnings of the generations before us, which inspire us to create our own small but unique contributions. These contributions emerge from engagement with others, which enables us to sense the Spirit.

It is a matter of balance, because individual insight, vision and creativity are critically important for breakthrough ideas. However, they are still one way or another, a product of, and building on collective learnings. We also need always to keep in mind that our inspiration can be faulty. We can misinterpret “God’s message”, or we can lack key pieces of information to mention just two of the many ways in which we can be misled as individuals. There are as many false prophets as true ones and a large dose of humility is always necessary as it opens our hearts to hearing the views of the other and to sensing the spirit in the connection.

In commenting on the need for “individual guidance to yield to corporate guidance” Richard Foster makes the following points

There must also come a knowledge of the direct, active, immediate leading of the Spirit *together*...Much of the teaching on divine guidance in our century has been noticeably deficient on the corporate aspect. We have received excellent instruction on how God leads us through Scripture and through reason and through circumstances and through the promptings of the Spirit upon the individual heart. There has also been teaching – good teaching – on the exceptional means of guidance: angels, visions, dreams, signs, and more. But we have heard little about how God leads through his people, the body of Christ. On that subject there is profound silence.

(Foster, pp. 218-219)

Foster suggests that the emphasis on private guidance in Western cultures “is a product of their emphasis upon individualism.” In my view the individualism in turn is in part a product of the conception of a personal God, or a God out there that the individual learns and takes private guidance from. A cultural over- emphasis on individualism damages community and

yet it is community that creates and fosters the connections in which we encounter Spirit which I believe helps explain the fundamental importance of community to Quakerism from its earliest days.

Book list

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