



“What Canst Thou Say?”

The Question: What Canst Thou Say?

An Answer:

Animating the entire Creation is that which is eternal -- that to which we have given a thousand names. Elusive, yet within our grasp; mysterious, yet knowable; remote, yet intimate; this great Creative Principle is that out of which everything comes, that from which everything derives its vitality, that in which everything finds its rest, and that to which everything will return.

This Creative Principle is within us and around us and seeking to make Itself known to us. This is an awesome miracle known in human experience. Yet the Creative Principle is also beyond the power of our words to define, beyond the capacity of our mental concepts to apprehend. While it is good that we seek to use the powers of thought and of speech to communicate our awareness of this foundational reality, we need constantly to be alert to the dangers of being misled by conventional notions and mental cliches, constantly aware of the risks of seeking to domesticate the ineffable with the limitations of our words and concepts, constantly aware that with a lack of respect for mystery we deprave ourselves.

Notwithstanding the limitations of our speech and thought, we can discern four related elements which characterize, in part, the Creative Principle. There is the element of love which was moved to raise all things up from the formless dust and which constantly upholds them in an atmosphere of active sympathy; there is the element of energy which fuels the cosmos with vitality and enthusiasm; there is the element of lawfulness, of form, and of orderliness which keeps everything in balance; and there is the element of truth which illuminates everything and which provides each of the created orders of beings with the degree of wisdom suitable to its estate. We cannot fully comprehend these four elements, nor can we describe how they interpenetrate each other as characteristics of the divine, nor can we claim that this concept of four elements and the idea of their blending fully expresses the extent and the wonder of the Creative Principle. But we can proceed with confidence that these hints establish a basis for faithful and authentic living.

As human beings we know ourselves to be incomplete. With a mysterious wisdom the Creative Principle constituted us as beings of indeterminate nature. We are endowed both with the capacity to complete our own character and with the freedom to do so -- for better or for worse. We long for completedness, and with our efforts to achieve this completedness we arrive at our most noble accomplishments and also at our most crushing defeats. This completedness can be found in many ways, some of them evil, some bad, some merely prosaic, some good, and some excellent.

As we succeed in gaining a degree of awareness of the ineffable mystery of the Creative Principle we are shown the way to complete our natures, both as individuals and as communities, in accordance with the love, lawfulness, energy,

and wisdom which is the essence of our natural and intended character. As we draw closer in our character to the underlying principles of the Creation we become more exactly who we are meant to be, and we are filled with joy and with a power to act usefully which partakes of the mysterious Creative Principle itself. And just as we perceive that a beautiful thing in some mysterious way expresses and contains all beauty, and a good gesture, no matter how small, somehow contains and expresses all goodness, we also see that the fully realized human being, the perfect human being, expresses the divinity of the Creative Principle in a pure, perfect and complete way; and similarly, that the perfect community expresses in a pure, perfect and complete way the characteristic balance, order, harmony and peace which is the natural destiny of the Creation. The life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth offers one perfected image of the divine life operating under human conditions. Happily, there are many other images available as well.

By cultivating an inner silence we make a space, beyond thoughts and words, where the Creative Principle can make Itself known to us, becoming our guide. While the total perfectedness of individual human beings and of communities has been realized only very rarely, the sincere and devoted efforts of countless millions of persons to realize this goal fills us with enthusiasm and awe, and inspires our own steps in the search. The various spiritual cultures which have grown up during humankind's long pilgrimage on the earth have sought to conserve and pass on the wisdom of those who have engaged in this search. They seek to help the human being complete her or his true nature. They also serve to orient entire societies in the ways of upholding justice and peace, and in the shared task of developing human cooperation and of nurturing the kinds of relationships which support material survival and spiritual growth. While spiritual cultures, too, have rarely as yet achieved total perfectedness, they provide inestimably valuable insights and help. Everyone should seek out the highest forms of expression in one of these spiritual cultures and practice its disciplines with openness and expectancy. Each person should look to spiritual cultures other than her or his own as a source of complimentary illumination and insight.

Movement towards the completedness of the individual and of communities requires the resolution of paradoxes, of intellectually unresolvable dichotomies: freedom and order; liberty and service; tradition and innovation; justice and mercy; the immanence and transcendence of the Creative Principle; the simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature; the eternal and the temporal. Although the logical mind is offended by these paradoxes, the spiritual faculties are challenged and stimulated by them. Humankind's vocation is thus to carry out a precarious balancing act, a vocation which can be accomplished not by logic but only with wisdom and with love. In the spiritual realm simple dogmatic assertions tend to be misleading because, by their nature, such assertions tend to come down on one side or the other of the fundamental paradoxes. Thus, legalism, lawyerliness and literalism are the enemies of all true spirituality. Poetry and parable are its friends. In seeking the completedness for which we long, we find that, while we cannot adequately describe the Truth, we can enact it, and that which is unutterable can be rendered visible by the way we live.

While respecting the limitations of language and reason in addressing the paradoxes and mysteries of the spiritual realm, care must be exercised not to evade the discipline of clear thinking with respect to those areas of life where it is of positive value. A habit of muddled or sloppy thinking is not an avenue to sanctity.

Family life provides an essential school for tutelage in right living, in finding the completedness for which we long. The strenuous spiritual discipline of lovingly and generously partnering a spouse and of nurturing the spiritual and physical well-being of a new generation provides us with our most significant opportunity for growth toward the Truth and is the occasion of life's finest blessings. While there is an honorable place in the community's life for those pursuing a single way of life or a celibate way of life, it is in their task of supporting the possibility of healthy and happy family living that social, religious, and governmental institutions realize their highest potential.

The movement towards completedness and perfectedness on the part of individuals and communities requires a willingness to change, change towards that which is eternal and at the foundation of the Creation. Not every change is good, and humankind has found through the generations that it is far easier to make things worse than to make them better. To the discerning individuals and communities who are willing to practice silent listening, the Creative Principle is available to distinguish valid change from false innovation. Working to build up honorable social arrangements, and laboring nonviolently to encourage peace and reconciliation among individuals, communities, and nations are universal responsibilities.

Gratitude, mutual respect, a sense of responsibility, repentance, readiness to forgive, patience, tolerance, trust, trustworthiness, love, and the willing restriction of our individual interests and desires for the sake of others and of the whole are virtues which express authentic spirituality. The deepest wisdom a human person can achieve is to know that it is our nature to serve, to participate in political, social and family life out of an inner silence, that is, without any demand for oneself, without any narrowness or pettiness of soul to poison one's work. In so doing we build out of the very same source from which the Creation itself emanates. The human person's greatest problem is not a search for immortality, is not to cry for a way to continue its existence, but rather to find the way to exalt the measure of existence one is given. We are absorbed into what is immortal prior to our descent into the grave through our faithful presence to the Creative Principle. When life is lived as a completedness, as an answer, death is a home-coming, an ultimate self-dedication to the divine. Thus, for the truly pious person it is a privilege to die.

Daniel A. Seeger
Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086

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