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Otherness

In the last chapter we discovered that seeing the world through eyes of wonder enables us to perceive things that would otherwise be missed. Wonder combined with attentiveness enables us to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. This has an important counterpart in interpersonal relations. Here too we need to learn to penetrate the facade of familiarity. Familiarity easily obscures the presence of the unfamiliar stranger in those with whom we are most intimate. Soulful spirituality invites us to do a better job of recognizing and prizing the otherness of others rather than simply seeing them as extensions of ourselves or using them as containers for our own projections.

Honoring the unique individuality of others has deep spiritual significance in that if we fail to recognize the other in people we encounter, we have no chance of discerning the presence of the Transcendent Other. However, if we learn to show hospitality to the stranger that is part of every person we encounter, we are showing hospitality to the Wholly Other who is in them.

I recently met a woman who, on learning that I was writing this book, told me that she did not consider herself spiritual but that her work served her in the way she thought spirituality or religion might serve others. She was a cultural anthropologist who had spent her life studying the Karamojong tribe of Uganda—an ethnic group whose

lifestyle has changed little since the eighteenth century. To do this, she lived with them for several years in an effort to understand their experience and see the world through their eyes. It was, she said, a way to fulfill her fundamental passion of deep knowing of others in their uniqueness. This was what made her life worthwhile. It was more basic than her work. It was her life, her deepest value, and the source of her deepest fulfillment. And, I told her, it was her spirituality.

Honoring otherness is a deep and essential part of any authentic spirituality. In its absence there can be nothing transcendent to the self; the self must be its own god. In its absence the holy is so shrunken as to be trivial. If we are to actually encounter the truly holy and the Wholly Other, we must start by honoring the otherness we meet in people. Describing the sacred work of Christian spiritual direction, Margaret Silf suggests that "when we open our heart's experience to each other in trust, we are entering on holy ground where there is no place for comment, criticism, or correction, but only for a response of loving acceptance. On this holy ground God-in-you is listening to God-in-the-other."[1] What she describes is not limited to spiritual direction. It is the truth of any genuine act of hospitality toward the otherness of any human being.

Encountering Otherness

That others are in some important ways not like us is both a threat and a curiosity. Jean-Paul Sartre was most impressed with the first of these two responses, viewing the encounter with the other in decidedly inhospitable terms. The threat lies in the fact that the other has the power to challenge our way of being. Simply by virtue of living from another center of meaning and approaching the world from another vantage point, the other is a threat to the validity of our basic life posture and a challenge to our lived spirituality.

Emmanuel Levinas, who was, like Sartre, a twentieth-century French philosopher, recognized this threat but viewed it quite differently. He described it as a "traumatism of astonishment."[2] In much the same way in which wonder enables us to experience the wondrous all around us, respectful openness to others can provide astonishing benefits to spirit and soul. While the encounter has the potential to be disruptive, it also has the potential to expand our horizons, decenter our ego, and ease the tyranny of our egocentricity. It can also attenuate

our self-absorption by challenging us to take seriously an alternate way of being human. Within every encounter with the other is the wondrous possibility of new ways of understanding ourselves and the world and new ways of appropriating truth. The other offers us, therefore, the possibility of fresh and more vital ways of living our life and more authentic ways of living our spirituality.

I didn't actually learn about the spiritual implications of honoring otherness from Sartre or Levinas. The person who first drew this important dimension of spirituality to my attention was my son Sean. He has always been attracted to the otherness of people. It drew him into studies in anthropology and subsequently led to his work in a company that serves people who want to experience the cultures of the world, not simply see the sights. I have always admired the way he meets people where they are and respects their uniqueness. More than that, he is fascinated by what makes them different from himself. I understood when he, as a teenager, told me that he no longer considered himself to be a Christian. I knew he needed the space to find his own way. But when, more recently, he told me that he did not see himself as spiritual—at least not in terms of the picture of spirituality that I had been presenting in my books—I knew that I needed to clarify and broaden the picture. For, as I told him, his eye for the uniqueness of others and his passion to respect this was one of the things that most deeply assured me that his spiritual journey remained well on track.

To say that every human being is an other is to say that each is a person with her or his own unique identity and way of experiencing the world. Ethnicity, education, culture, religion, and class may make us superficially look like each other, but in the depth of our subjectivity and in the contours of our soul, we are absolutely unique. Consequently, no one can ever know another person fully. This is both the great mystery and the great loneliness of our individuality. But, while we can never know another fully, the other person has the capacity to enrich our experience of the world by adding dimensions of his or her otherness. This is the gift that lies beyond the threat of otherness.

Managing the Threat of the Other

We always encounter the other as a face that is both familiar and unfamiliar. It is that unfamiliarity that awakens both our fear and our curiosity. Because the fear is always present as an undercurrent, we often seek to minimize the threat. There are two main ways by which we do this—either by exaggerating the otherness or by minimizing it.

The most common way we deal with the threat presented by a self that is not our self is to exaggerate the difference by treating the other as one of "them" as opposed to one of "us." It is so easy to dismiss and treat as a nonperson anyone we consider to be one of them. Think, for example, of the way we often do not even notice the homeless person we might encounter on the street. Or think of the lengths to which we go to avoid the person with noticeable deformity or disease. Something similar happens in racism, ageism, sexism, weightism, heightism, and other types of ism discrimination. All forms of prejudice allow us to manage the threat of otherness by avoiding encounter with whole classes of people whose differentness makes us uncomfortable. And we do this simply by dismissing them—failing to acknowledge their otherness, sometimes even failing to count them as humans.

The other strategy is to reduce otherness to sameness. This is the preferred strategy with intimates and can be most clearly seen in romantic love. To say that love is blind is, more precisely, to say that love is blind to otherness. Unconsciously we may be attracted by some of the things about the other person that make them different from us, and consciously we may be able to acknowledge the most benign of these. But the fundamental otherness of the other is minimized by treating lovers as basically like us. This may seem like a charitable assumption, but it will inevitably produce problems when the otherness of our intimates can no longer be ignored.

Both these strategies may reduce the threat that would otherwise come with a genuine encounter of the other person in his or her uniqueness. But they also eliminate the opportunities for the enrichment of our lives that this encounter could have brought. Both surround us with the seductively comforting sense of being safely in a place of sameness. This sense of safety is, of course, an illusion because the stranger lives on in the heart of the intimate. Genuine intimacy comes only when that stranger is welcomed and embraced in his or her uniqueness and difference from us. Deep friendship involves befriending not just what the other person has in common with us but the important ways in which she or he is and will always be different from us. It means cherishing the otherness of the other, welcoming and honoring the stranger in the friend or intimate.

Strangers, Monsters, and Gods

If we are honest, though, we have to admit that strangers often still make us uneasy, even after we apply these first-level strategies of managing the threat of the other. There are, however, two additional ways of defusing the danger associated with strangers: strangers can be turned into either monsters or gods.

We manage the first of these transformations by means of projection. This is a variation on the strategy of exaggerating the difference of the other. But in this case, we make the other not only one of "them" (not me and not us) but "it" (against me and us). We effect this vilification by treating the stranger as simply a container for all the parts of our self that we seek to disown. We then dump the despised and feared parts of our self into this container and view the resulting monster as wicked and dangerous. This does not eliminate the fear that was aroused by the stranger. What it does, however, is help us disown the undesirable parts of our self and package them in a way that makes it acceptable to both hate and fear the monster—even to kill it if given the chance.

Turning the threatening other into a god is a bit more challenging, but not as difficult as it might seem. We do it by means of idealization—an unconscious defense mechanism designed to protect us against terror by appeasement. We kneel in vulnerability before this strangely fearsome god, hoping that by acts of contrition and offerings of one sort or another we might avert the danger that the stranger represents. Now fear and awe intermingle, and by virtue of this intermingling, the fear is somewhat diluted.

These two strategies are not as dissimilar as they may seem. In fact, the same type of person is vulnerable to both. In terms of their psychological makeup, these people are associated with what psychoanalyst Melanie Klein called the paranoid-schizoid stage of development,[3] a primitive stage of psychological functioning associated with extremely limited capacity to hold together the good and bad qualities of either self or other. This results in a propensity to both projection and idealization as others are rendered either all bad or all good. Fanatical followers who invest gurus with magical powers and moral excellence at the same time find scapegoats whom they blame for the disasters that often befall these leaders; the scapegoats can be easily sacrificed because they are viewed as evil incarnate.[4]

Tourists and Discoverers

These are not the only ways of responding to the otherness of others. Not all failure to respect and honor the uniqueness of people can be reduced to psychopathology, and things are not always as dramatic as the examples we have been considering. Our openness to other people will be reflected in the types of movies we watch or novels we read, the ways in which we use our leisure time, and the breadth of our circle of friends and acquaintances. Some people spend their whole life within the ghetto of their ethnic or socioeconomic communities, never genuinely getting to know anyone outside of their tribe. Others seem to live in many communities and draw friends and acquaintances from many different worlds.

Our approach to travel will also tell a great deal about our openness to otherness. Think of the difference between two types of international travelers. The tourist—at his worst—visits a new country to collect souvenirs, photos, and another stamp on his passport. He easily complains about the things that are not the same as back home and brushes up against local people and their culture in only the most superficial way. In contrast, the discoverer—at her best—visits that same country to meet local people as a way to enter and know their culture as fully as possible. For her, it is the otherness that is most attractive; for him, it is the sameness. Of course, this is a bit of a caricature. But the differences between these two travelers are remarkably apparent to those who live in the place being visited—likewise, the impact of the trip on the visitors is dramatically dissimilar.

Some live with this sort of openness when traveling, but when at home they settle into a cocoon of safety that insulates them from otherness. We do not have to cross oceans to encounter otherness. All we have to do is be prepared to meet it in the next person who crosses our path. Doing so is the essence of hospitality.

Hospitality

In common usage the concept of hospitality is associated with such things as throwing a great party or entertaining guests. We even have a hospitality industry based on the business of making people feel welcome and at home when they travel. The roots of the concept of hospitality suggest something much richer.

In the West the concept of hospitality comes to us primarily via the ancient Mediterranean world, where it was much more than a matter of entertaining one's neighbors at dinner. According to the commentaries on the Torah, Abraham—the father of Judaism—spent his days sitting at the doorway of his tent waiting to welcome any who passed by. Hospitality began with the provision of food and protection for travelers but also included a bath, supplies for the traveler's onward journey, and an escort along the road toward the next destination. Embodying these ideals of hospitality, Abraham's solicitousness would not have been limited to accommodating the stranger who arrived at the door, but would have extended to running after the ones passing by to press them to accept the gift of welcome that he and his wife, Sarah, wished to extend. This understanding of hospitality became central to Judaism and remains particularly clear in traditional, observant Jewish families as they welcome strangers at Shabbat, the special weekly meal on the Sabbath.

Christians embraced this Jewish tradition of welcoming strangers, as did Muslims. The Christian monastic tradition placed hospitality at the center of its raison d'être. Part of the Rule of Saint Benedict—the founding document that still serves as the operating vision of the Benedictine order—is that all guests who arrive should be received as Christ.[5] It was this that allowed monasteries to serve as the inns of medieval Europe.

Genuine hospitality has enormous potential to enrich relationships. The effects are most spectacular in marriages and other relationships of intimacy, but the principle is equally applicable to all relationships. This is what Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had in mind when he distinguished between "I-Thou" and "I-it" relationships.[6] We relate to someone as a Thou when we welcome their otherness and treat them as sacred. The relationship can then be subject to subject, or personal. In contrast, we treat another as an it—regardless of whether actually animate or inanimate—whenever we engage with them as an object. But to do so, even when done with professional benevolence, is to dehumanize the other by offering them an impersonal relationship. Truly personal relationships demand that we engage the other as a Thou—embracing their otherness and their humanity and in so doing helping both to flourish.

Part of the gift that the other can give us is that he or she has stories to tell us that we have never heard before, stories that may not be easily reconciled with our own stories.[7] These stories will be both

enriching and subversive. Dialogue always is. New stories have the power to stimulate our imagining and transform our seeing. They can inspire new ways of living and open up fresh possibilities for understanding our life and the world. They offer, therefore, enrichment for spirit and soul that can never be found when we simply listen to stories that comfortably support our own.

Dialogue

According to Buber, all real living exists in meeting another as a Thou. The place where this happens is in dialogue. In genuine dialogue the other becomes present, not merely in the imagination or feelings, but in the depths of our being. Meeting under these conditions results in each participating in the life of the other. What was between two people is now within each of them. This is the mystery of dialogue.

Dialogue is one of the deepest forms of soul engagement we can experience with another person. Friends share what we generally call conversation. But not all conversation is worthy of being described as dialogue. Conversation can involve little more than passing time through chitchat. At other times it is simply the exchange of information. True dialogue is richer than such simple conversation. Dialogue involves shared inquiry designed to increase the awareness and understanding of all parties. The goal of dialogue is exploration, discovery, and insight. In dialogue I attempt to share how I experience the world and seek to understand how you do so. In this process each participant touches and is touched by others. Inevitably, this results in each person being changed.

Dialogue is rare because it can be threatening and will often be difficult. For many people, the possibility of being changed by the other is simply a deal breaker. For years I have argued for psychotherapy to be practiced as a form of dialogue. However, the prospect of meeting the other person in a place where the therapist, not just the patient, might be changed is simply too threatening for many therapists who view what they do as a technical procedure. Offering psychotherapy in such a way is a clear example of an I-it relationship. Prizing objectivity over subjectivity, the relationship will always be less than fully personal.

Mutuality does not require symmetry of roles. Even in situations where I am recognized as having the primary responsibility for the

care of the other person, mutuality can be present if I am able to answer the following three questions affirmatively:

1. Am I willing to bring myself, not just my care, to the encounter?
2. Can I accept the other as a whole and separate person, as he or she is?
3. Am I willing to be open enough to their experience and ideas that my own may change as a result of our interaction?

If I can answer these affirmatively, dialogue can be present. If I cannot, the relationship may involve expertise and empathy, but it will never be an encounter worthy of being called dialogue. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that in true dialogue, both parties must be willing to change. "We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of—not only within—our own group. If we do not believe that, entering into dialogue would be a waste of time."[8]

Many other things beyond the professionalization of relationship and a fear of being changed keep us from such encounters. Some people are so mistrustful of other beliefs and spiritualities and so certain of their own grasp on truth that they are incapable of engaging others deeply except by means of argument or proselytizing. Meeting someone in dialogue always involves at least a temporary suspension of our presuppositions about our selves and the world. This means it also always involves a degree of vulnerability to truth. Others are threatened by the mystery of life in general, which therefore limits their engagement with the mystery of the life of another because doing so might bring them into contact with the mystery of their own life.

A lack or fear of genuine knowledge of one's own self also serves as a major barrier to dialogue. Dialogue is the meeting of two or more selves. What I have to give to others is directly proportional to the depth of my knowledge of my self. If I do not know my self, the only self I have to offer in dialogue will be a false self. But false selves invite and engage with false selves. True and authentic ways of being emerge with difficulty under conditions of an encounter with a false self. But to the extent that I am genuinely and deeply my true self, others who meet me are afforded an opportunity to also be their true selves.

A lack of courage and a fear of intimacy also block genuine dialogue. It takes courage to respond to the invitation to share self with another person. If I am afraid of genuinely meeting another self, I will prefer a conversational form that makes fewer demands on its participants. Genuine dialogue is an intimate encounter. It is not for those who lack the courage to honestly engage with another.

Finally, dialogue is also impaired by a need for control. One can control interviews and conversations, but one must surrender to genuine dialogue. Much like moving into a flowing stream of water, one must enter dialogue ready to let go and be carried along on a journey. We can create opportunities for dialogue and we can participate in it, but we don't actually create dialogue nor can we ever control it. If I must control where I go and where the conversation or relationship goes, I cannot afford dialogue. If, on the other hand, I can temporarily relinquish my need to control myself, others, and my relationship with them, dialogue offers a unique opportunity for an enlargement of the self of all participants.

Ultimate Otherness

Honoring otherness has always been a central aspect of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, each of which understands that beyond the immanent other is the Transcendent Other. Levinas, speaking as a Jew, makes this point by suggesting that the face of the other always bears the trace of God.[9] We honor the otherness of people because they, like us, bear the image of God—created of dust and divine breath. The other is, therefore, the middle ground between me and God. The possibility of a relationship with another person is grounded in the fact that that person is already in relationship to God. In others, therefore, we encounter the Ultimate Other. And honoring the otherness of other people is honoring the face of the Divine that they reflect.

From a Christian perspective, Richard Norris argues that "goodness for human beings consists in affirmation of the other, and that means both the ultimate other—God—and creaturely others—the neighbor. Human beings are so constituted that their life, growth and fulfillment as persons depends on their openness to the other which addresses them, makes claim on them, and enables them to come out of themselves."[10] This is how important other people are in Christian spirituality. They are often the place of our most direct encounter with God. It is through them that the Ultimate Other often addresses us and invites us to life.

But no one has better understood the importance of otherness to Christian spirituality than Rudolf Otto.[11] It was Otto who first de-

scribed God as the Wholly Other, arguing that the experience of the holiness or sacredness of God is encountering the otherness of God. If God is the Supreme Other—the one whom we should always encounter with the mixture of fear and fascination that he called *mysterium tremendum*, not simply with casual familiarity that replaces the divine otherness with more comfortable sameness—then our openness to the otherness of those whom Christians believe are created in the image of God will be directly related to our openness to God.

Honoring otherness forms an equally central feature of Jewish spirituality, where the sacredness of the other is also grounded in the sacred otherness of God. The otherness of the Divine is so profound and familiarity recognized to be so dangerous that the divine name is never pronounced by Jews, many of whom write the English word *God* as "G-d" or "Gd."[12] This is the basis for the sacred otherness of humans made in God's image.

The heart of personal life is an encounter with others that we cannot control without destroying. In some mysterious way, each time we honor the otherness of another person and meet them in respect as a Thou, we meet the Divine. Each such encounter holds the possibility of our transformation. Buber described this as the possibility of "healing through meeting,"[13] an idea that Carl Rogers took to the heart of the person-centered approach to psychotherapy that he developed.[14] Healing does not come from what one person does to the other but from what both experience by virtue of the mutuality, presence, vulnerability, and engagement that both offer.

James Mundackal states that "to be is to be related. Everything in the world is being with others."[15] Dialogue helps us glimpse into eternity because it always involves the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and transformational meeting with the otherness that lies beyond my self. This is why prizing otherness and meeting others in dialogue lies right at the core of the life of soulful spirituality. For it is here that we encounter the possibility of relief from the small world of our ego-self. It is here that we encounter that which is truly transcendent to our self. It is here, therefore, that we encounter that around which the self can be integrated and aligned.

Honoring Otherness

To make this more practical, let me end this chapter with several things you can do if you wish to further cultivate your honoring of otherness.

- As I suggested in this chapter, one of the places where otherness gets lost most easily is in intimacy. Reflect on the person to whom you are closest. How much of the stranger remains in his or her presence with you? Try to notice and affirm the parts of this person that are different from you—the dreams and passions that are not yours and that may not fit well with yours. Cultivate the safety for both of you to be strong in your own unique persons, and do what you can to encourage the full living out of the parts of this person that you do not understand but that you know to be important threads in his or her sacred otherness.
- Do some research on a racial, ethnic, or cultural group about which you know very little—perhaps an indigenous population in your own country or some other part of the world. Try to learn as much as possible about the traditions, beliefs, values, and myths that have shaped these people. Get genuinely curious about their life, not just the facts about them as a group, and follow that curiosity as you seek to really understand what it would be like to experience life as a member of that group.
- Do the same sort of research on a spirituality that is quite different from your own and about which you are unfamiliar. It may be one that has long interested you, or one about which you know nothing—not even enough to have whetted your curiosity. If you disidentify with religious spiritualities, consider making one of the religious paths your focus. And if you are religious, consider trying to really get inside one of the nonreligious paths. In either case, approach this learning with empathy and respect, not argumentation. There is no argument to be won or lost. Your goal is simply to enrich your appreciation of the spiritual path by better understanding an expression of it that is quite different from your own.
- Now watch for someone in your world who is on a spiritual path that is different from your own and make an opportunity to talk with them about this. Again, don't use this encounter for debate. Consider it rather as an opportunity for dialogue. Listen with empathy and compassion to however much of their story they choose to share. Use it as a doorway into the mystery of their person. Let them know that you appreciate the honor that entering this mystery represents.

When we show welcoming hospitality to the otherness of others, we encounter the gift of a doorway to the broader realities that exist beyond the comfortable place in which we make our home. Embracing these realities—and all reality—is the foundational practice of soulful spirituality to which we now turn.

Chapter 10 Otherness

1. Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), xiii.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 73.

3. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude, and Other Works, 1946–1963* (London: Hogarth, 1984).

4. Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus* (London and New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 160.

5. Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 51.

6. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Free Press, 1971).

7. James L. Fredricks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35 (1998): 159–74.

8. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 9.

9. Jeffrey Bloechl, ed., *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

10. Richard Norris, *Understanding the Faith of the Church* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 76.

11. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

12. The Hebrew name for God is YHWH, often referred to as the sacred tetragrammaton and translated by Christians as *Yahweh*. Composed of the four Hebrew letters *yod*, *he*, *waw*, and *he*, the name YHWH was an unspeakable word for Jews. Richard Rohr suggests that the correct pronunciation of YHWH may well have been an attempt to replicate and imitate the sound of breathing (*The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* [New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009], 25). The one thing we do every moment of our lives is therefore to speak the name of God, this being our first and our last word as we enter and leave the world. This helps us understand why attentiveness to breathing is such an important spiritual practice and why it is so congruent with Christian spirituality.

13. Buber, *I and Thou*.

14. Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (New York: Mariner Books, 1995).

15. James Mundackal, *Man in Dialogue* (Alwaye, India: Pontifical Institute Publications, 1977), 103–4.