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Dear Michael,

Thank you for your response dated 12/7/00 and for the suggestion that I write an article about Tikkun and the unity statement. Last month I introduced the unity statement to a class at the First Unitarian Society here in Madison. Incidentally, I believe you know Michael Schuler, the minister at First U who offered me this opportunity to teach. In a recent session of our class titled Spiritual Explorations, concerns were raised regarding human participation in the "all encompassing unity". The concerns seem worthy of further discussion and I hope you will be a part of that.

Where does the evil of our time fit into this unity? Our failure as a culture to see the harmonious unity of negative/positive or feminine/masculine has led us to choose the positive over the negative (most notably life over death) thus destroying the unity and harmony of the natural world. On the individual level, is this misguided, false sense of "self"-- denying its own negative and thus bent on destruction (the best of intentions for opposite results notwithstanding)-- part of the unity, part of God? Or, are we talking about a destructive eddy going against the flow, a mental aberration compounded culturally to a grand scale, with the power to create disunity where none existed before? This Meister Eckhart quote comes to mind: "to the extent that you eliminate self from your activities, God comes into them--but not more and no less. Begin with that, and let it cost you your uttermost."

If we fail to distinguish between this false "self" estranged from God and the true self in at-one-ment with God, will we not further eclipse both self and God from our workaday world? Can the unity statement in its present form convey the urgency of our ecological crisis, the gathering storm created by our virtual "world" in fatal opposition to the real world of nature, or does it further blind us to it?

Personally, having spent years in wilderness areas around the world (often alone and entirely unarmed) I am now aware of the unity of opposites, including death/life, found in the good creation prior to our destructive interventions. The abundance, beauty, and mutual cooperation across species, the scarcity of violence beyond non-harmful threat displays, is truly awesome. But it took me over twenty years to see that--to see what was right in front of my eyes! Like most, I was blinded by scientific theory and conventional knowledge, "nature bloody in tooth and claw", and all that. I was unaware of the high order of cooperation observed between species by modern scientists. David Ehrenfeld's book, "Beginning Again" first introduced me to the amazing "cleaner fish" phenomenon observed around the coral reefs. With a change of color the little fish signal their much larger "enemies" to line up and open their mouths. The little fish are not harmed while inside the mouth and gills of the big fish, as they clean them of parasites. Many more documented examples of cooperation between species have become available since then and the closer we look the more we will find.

Once made aware of the blinders and no longer fixated on the rare incidents of actually observed violence nor on the more pervasive ideas of violence abstractly inferred in my head, I found harmony and cooperation to be the rule, not the exception, from Tasmania to the Alaskan border, wherever a

viable natural ecosystem still exists. As Thomas Aquinas noted: "error about the world redounds in error about God." The above revelation about the true nature of nature fully supports the Tikkun unity statement re: the nature of God. And it's equally obvious some humans are consciously and functionally part of this harmony and unity too but they remain exceptions to the rule. What I observe generally re: "humanity" and have experienced myself, is the fall of consciousness from unity into dualist abstractions, leading us away from reality into a virtual "reality" grounded on destructive illusions. War is the most dramatic example of this.

In sharp contrast to the supporting evidence for unity found in nature, what I witnessed in Viet Nam was a brutal craziness unlike anything I've observed in the wilderness. The destructive frenzy that normal, well intentioned American boys became willingly engaged in was of another order entirely. Please find enclosed a sermon (Reflections on the Nature of War) I wrote on the topic. I see the same things happening in Chicago ghettos today and realize that in both cases we have a mirror reflection of the larger culture that is folly to ignore. As Jonathan Kozol (Savage Inequalities, Amazing Grace) reminds us, this is a theological question. What I witnessed in a Chicago pre-school for ghetto children is what we unwittingly project onto nature-- an inner city version of T.S. Eliot's spiritual wasteland. The children's art work and writings chillingly reflected the popular understanding of "Social Darwinism" underpinning our capitalist system -- the bigger/stronger trampling or swallowing the smaller/weaker-- leading to diminished life for all.

This is totally contrary to the trend in nature where (Lewis Thomas says): "the survival of the fittest does not mean those fit to kill; it means those fitting in best with the rest of life." If, in our present state of "mind", we are already part of the unity--why are we reducing our beautiful and diverse planet to toxic dead zones? If religious leaders use the power of religious practice to sustain this fragmented aberration with cheap grace (we're OK the way we are or with only minor modifications), are we not abetting the demonic? Should any of us feel comfortable while our daily practices (based on toxic, nonrenewable and thus nonsustainable means) serve a global death machine?

The distinguished cosmologist Brian Swimme opened the science and religion conference on Whidbey Island last July with the announcement that "natural selection has been frozen". In effect he explained that "cultural selection" (human decision) is now the dominant force determining the world's further evolution or accelerating destruction. It's obvious that our modern day idols (science/technology) can give us no more than "...the best possible adjustment to an ever worsening situation" so long as we persist on our present path toward destruction. Can we claim our place as part of the greater unity while existing (ever more desperately) outside of its time tested principles i.e., by defying the order of sustainable living and being in harmony with the good creation? Or would such harmonious living ("...fitting in best with the rest of life") be both the sign and the measure of our at-one-ment with God and the all encompassing unity?

The participants in the class and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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The essence of reality is an all encompassing

U N I T Y

that embraces and indeed generates relative diversity.

It is not that you and I are creatures fashioned by God. It is rather that you and I are temporary manifestations of God. We are real. We are worthwhile. We are unique.

What we are not is eternal, separate and independent. We are God, though certainly not the totality of God.

The relationship between God and creation is like that between an ocean to its waves. Each wave, while unique and distinct in time and space, is yet a manifestation of the same ocean. Without the ocean there could be no wave. Yet waves are no less real for their having no existence separate from the ocean. Waves are no less distinct one from the other for their each being manifestations of the same ocean.

Similarly, you and I, and the myriad details of creation are no less real for being manifestations of the one God. Our separate reality is dependent upon that larger unity. Our separate reality is momentary, transient, and relative, but that does not make it illusory or unreal.

The aim of Jewish spiritual practice is to become conscious of both the wave and the ocean, the relative and the absolute. The Jewish mystic celebrates the self even as she experiences its transience. She honors the other even as she recognizes it as part of herself and the Greater Unity from which both arise. Jewish spirituality is not an "either/or" proposition; it is profoundly and unrelentingly "and."

Jewish spiritual practice does not supplant the self with the One, but awakens the self to its inseparability from the One. Jewish spiritual practice awakens you to the complementary awareness of the One and the Many as equal manifestations of God, and allows you to function in the relative world of separate selves while at the same time encountering through that relative world the absolute world of inseparable unity. It is not that the relative is more or less real than the absolute, but that both are authentic expressions of God, as we encounter God.

Rabbi Aharon haLevi Horowitz, Schneur Zalman's great disciple, taught this idea centuries ago.

God's only desire is to reveal unity through diversity. That is, to reveal that all of reality is unique in all of its levels and in all of its details, and nevertheless united in a fundamental oneness. The main point of creation... [is] to reveal the wholeness of God from the opposite perspective... For it is

the nature of completeness to include all opposites in the One.



Rabbi Aharon's point is crucial to understanding Jewish spiritual practice. The goal is not to exchange one opposite for another, but to see that all opposites are manifestations of God, the one true Reality. Heaven is no more divine than earth. An angel is no more holy than your neighbor. A rock is no less a manifestation of God than a rabbit. There is a profound equivalence among the animate and inanimate, and at the same time there is a profound difference.

You must hold both the relative and the absolute in mind simultaneously, seeing them both as manifestations of the greater nondual reality of God. This is the essence of Jewish spiritual practice. It cannot be done by retreating into one half of the whole or the other. It can only be done by allowing each half to take its place in the whole.

Selected from Minyan: Ten Principles for Living a Life of Integrity by Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro (forthcoming from Bell Tower, September, 1997). Rami Shapiro is a rabbi and storyteller of Temple Beth Or in Miami, Florida.

Pears

During the night a storm
The winds blow pears off the trees...
And in the morning a long chain of prisoners... and a soldier
with them...

Secretly, the women crouch and pick up the pears
And the soldier, an old man with a heart, pretends he does not
see

He is only much ashamed that the pears make them so happy.

—Henryka Karmel (translated by Woktek Sawa and Matthew Lippman)

"Pears" was written in 1946 by a teen-age woman interned in a Polish concentration camp.

Letter ?

