

# “In Hot Pursuit”

Sunday, February 11, 2007

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Printed by  
THE EXTENSION SERVICE  
of  
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “In Hot Pursuit”

## *Now Where Were We?*

One Truth, One Love. This was where I stopped in my journey toward a Liberal Theology. Reality is a unity. The truth of one thing cannot ultimately be hostile to the truth of some other part. Liberal religion affirms unity larger than diversity, rejects the notion of a separate religious reality with a separate truth.

But even then, the universe is vast in size and complexity. What holds it together into one reality? Forces of nature like gravity are part, but not all. What holds the truth of it all together is what I called conscious gravity, the attraction mind has for mind, thought for thought, being for being, love. One love. Those are the basic principles of liberal faith.

Why do this? For personal and professional reasons. The personal reason is that I wish to live a meaningful life. William James said, “The secret to a meaningful life is to spend it on something larger than your own.” As a religious liberal I need a vision I can depend on, in hard times and good times, that situates the vagaries of good and evil, a living faith that is worth living for. Negation is not enough. Doubt is not enough. Skepticism is not enough.

The professional reason is that if religious liberals cannot speak as powerfully as others, then we have no purpose. We are but bystanders to the real thing, a boutique religion for the few. And I am not here to serve up Perrier to a few while billions thirst for water. Theology digs the well.

I started with those two ideas, truth and love. Why should you believe in them? How do we know what’s really real and truly true. This, it turns out is an old question. “Who knows truly?” says the Hindu Rig Veda, which is 4000 years old. “Who here will declare whence it arose this creation...whether it was made or not; he in the highest heaven is its surveyor. Surely he knows, or perhaps he knows not.”

A millennium later the Hebrew prophet Isaiah offers another thought. “You have heard; now see all this... from this time forth I make you hear new things; hidden things which you have not known...”

In the last century Mohandas Gandhi said, “There is an undefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it though I cannot see it...a living power that...holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates.” To which Harry Emerson Fosdick seemingly added, “One would suppose that intelligent human beings, living on this wandering island in the sky...would be humble when they try to formulate the truth about life.... All theological systems and all others that will follow them are partial, tentative, contemporary formulations of great matters.... To see the incompleteness and falsity in them all, to trust none of them as a whole, to see always the Thing to be explained is infinitely greater than our tentative conditioned explanation – this seems to be wisdom.”

With that we begin, asking how we know these things, or anything for that matter.

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## *Confession*

My most constant friend,

I am thinking of falling, not the fallible nature of our species and its lack of perfection, but three actual falls, which are also failures of will as well as body. Being a confession, these letters are about mistakes and failings, which I share with you to make them clearer to me. Often writing it down delivers new insight, don't you agree?

With our family heading toward four children, my parents needed a bigger place, a house. Odd how I cannot recall moving into this place as I did the townhouse, though I am older, five in fact. We shall be here for four years, when a new job returns my parents to Baltimore. That move is the key moment in my youth, but not part of this confession.

My first fall was foolish. How many dreams can we keep over the years? This is one of two from my earliest days that I can still recall. In it I am flying. I am at home, and rather than walk down the stairs I simply float down, as a balloon might waft. This sensation is so strong upon awakening that I am sure it is true. Standing at the top of the mercifully short stairway I fling myself into air and land hard, midway down the steps, feet buckling, rolling to the bottom, banging my head against the wall.

Mother was on the phone and instantly dropped it to come to my aid. She asked what happened and I knew at that moment what a fool I was to think I could fly. Telling mother I thought I could fly seemed as stupid that moment as thinking I could a moment before. I made something up. All that day, I pondered how I could have felt so sure and been so wrong – wrong about gravity, wrong about flying, wrong to confuse them.

The second fall was criminal. My younger brother and I had bunk beds in our room. He was on top. One night he simply refused to shut up and go to sleep. I wanted quiet. Even my parents demanded quiet. But he would not stop. I kicked him from beneath and because he was rolling about he actually fell out of the bed and landed on the floor. He cried, my folks came running. They felt for lumps and bumps and decided he would be fine, but threw me a look of fierce disapproval. What else could I have done, I wondered?

His wrist was swollen the next day, so mother took him to the doctor who discovered a cracked wrist. He first had a bandage, but being so active they had to install a cast; with each I doubled my guilt. Yet, while I carried my shame about me as a burden, he all but ignored it, even teaching himself to ride a bike while healing. I did not yet know how to ride, being afraid of the inevitable falling, so it was quite painful for me to watch my younger brother with the arm cast showing much more pluck and nerve and ultimately riding a bike around me as I stood there in the street.

The third fall was stupid. A while later, after I had taught myself to ride a bike, my brother and some friends were skidding across the wet grass on our lawn after a spring shower. They pedaled a little then hit the brakes and slid marvelously, going past our house and alongside the fence of our next door neighbor.

Now, our house and the others were uphill from the street, such that we had to climb a set of stairs to reach the flat part of the lawn. The joyriding took place at the top of the hill. Our neighbor, the one with the fence, had a built in garage which meant that there was a driveway cut into the hill with brick walls on either side. In other words, when they slid, they were heading toward the driveway wall.

Eager to show my superior strength, to my brother especially, I asked to give it a try and went faster and farther than the others. I slammed on the brakes and enjoyed a marvelous wet skid but soon realized I was not going to stop in time. My bike and I went over the edge and we both hit the ground where the driveway met the opposite wall.

I was instantly afraid, letting out a howling cry, as much for the broken bike as for my cuts and bruises. Our cleaning woman came to my aid and helped me into the house, sitting me on a bed sheet spread on the floor so as not to get blood on anything. I was frightened, ashamed and in pain.

It was quite the drama, and my brother rounded up his friends to come and see me there, with all my blood and tears and dirt. It seemed then that I was doomed to failure – either too frightened or too reckless in proving I was not a coward.

You might say that I was never at home in my own skin. That easy unity of mind and body, like my brother, was never easy for me, and I was tormented by both my own self loathing wondering what was wrong with me, and a raging envy for those for whom it was easy. And I felt helpless, because I could see no path away from this. Over the years I learned to hide it, but it never ever went away. To this day I often feel a bystander in my own life, reacting not acting. But like that day when I was bleeding on the bed sheet, I cannot see the way out. On my worst days I do not believe there is a way out.

\* \* \*

## ***Profession***

Young friend,

How do we know what we know? I have said the universe has one truth and that it is held together by one love. But how do I know this, how can I trust my thoughts and experiences to show me the way? After all, I am but one person, very limited in what I personally know. Already, I have resorted to citing others, other minds and books, to shore up my ideas, to show I am not alone or out of touch. But how do I know that they know? What gives me any confidence in what they say?

I want to talk about revelation, which sounds esoteric, but it is at the heart of this question of knowing, even for liberal theology. Most religions depend on the idea of revelation, that there is a text that people can depend on to tell them exactly what is truly true and really real because it comes from outside the fallible world of human knowledge.

First, let me say I agree with you on this. Yes, there is truth to the idea of revela-

tion. Old Isaiah is right. Much really is hidden, but not just religious stuff. For example, look at your ear. You can't. Neither can you see your own back. Some of the simplest facts are hidden. You have not felt the surface of the moon or seen the depths of the Marianas Trench, but you know they are real as sure as your ear or your elbow. Before we consider the idea of hidden truths of religion I want you to notice something much simpler. There's a lot of reality that's just as hidden.

Walk down a street and as you go what was in front of you is now behind. They are no longer perceivable unless you turn around. Think of the house fronts and realize that there are rooms in those buildings without any personal evidence of them. Strictly speaking, they are not perceived but inferred. Philosopher Merleau-Ponty writes:

...the places in which I find myself are never completely given to me.  
... Thus there is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception...[which] requires both this presence and this absence.

He means that our way of being includes *not* perceiving as much as perceiving. The reality of what you don't see is so automatic that we fail to notice. We rely on a simple principle called object permanence.

Jean Piaget, the founder of cognitive theory, described the development of infant minds and noticed that before the age of six months, out of sight is truly out of mind. Place a toy in front of a baby and it will respond, but move it behind a screen, out of sight, and the baby has no awareness of it. Later, babies realize the difference between perception and presence. By then, a toy block shown and then hidden will lead the baby to seek the block. The object's transcendent reality, transcending the perception of the baby, that is, becomes evident to the baby. We realize the world is there even if we do not see it. That's object permanence.

We realize before we can express it that there are places we do not perceive that are nonetheless real. The knowledge that there are hidden things, and that ultimately these hidden things comprise most of the world, is a one of the foundations of human intelligence. In a sense, there is an irreducible element of faith that there is a world out there. For example, we do not see radio waves but we believe they exist.

So there are two elements of knowing that are not knowledge itself but essential to it, namely: hiddenness and belief in the reality of hidden things. This is also another aspect of the principle of One Truth, to which one can add, "whether we know it or not." For the mind assumes that what is perceived and what is not nonetheless constitute one reality.

So "One Truth" does not mean humans can perceive and grasp it all, and in fact we cannot. As a result, we rely upon hiddenness to verify the visible. Just as we rely upon our presumption that house fronts have rooms behind them, and the streets really do have water pipes, and radio waves are truly there, so we rely on the reality of unseen things to sustain the reality of all things, including seen things.

This leads to a further conclusion. It is the unseen that proves the unity of truth, not the seen. Indeed we cannot assume a universe of the size we know it to be unless we accept that most of it is not perceivable. The idea that there are hidden

things is not only rational it is essential.

This extended sojourn into the reality of the unseen explains why revelation makes sense. The idea of revelation is rational because once we know there is so much we cannot know, we do not know what we do not know. We want to uncover the hidden and see what is missing. But wanting it does not make it so. And when the desire outreaches common sense, believing for example that reality is all a software program or that the world rides on the back of a giant turtle, we risk splitting reality into two realms.

When it claims to supersede other knowledge, revelation ultimately claims to contain all the truth. This is fundamentalism which, whatever its form, says that revelation trumps all facts no matter how powerful. Whoever has revelation has all truth, and their judgment becomes infallible. But as scholar James Luther Adams observed, even if a revelation were infallible how would we know? One must claim to be infallible at perceiving the infallible. This implicit claim is so often overlooked that we never see it.

There is no "cure" for our limited capacity. This fact, that we cannot see or know it all, is why we need revelation and want it. But how can we answer the need without, ironically, forgetting our limitations?

Have you ever seen a Zen garden? They are remarkable for their simplicity of design. Gravel, stones, perhaps a small tree; little ebullience of the kind we associate with gardens. But their point is not sensual. The few objects in them are so arranged that you can never see them all at once. Everything can be seen, but not at one view. Something is always hidden. When you move, something gets revealed, but something else gets hidden.

Unveiling entails veiling. The view that allows you to see the pine means you cannot see the small rock. The telescope brings stars closer but obscures the trees. Daylight hides the stars. Whatever you perceive requires being unable to perceive something else. This sounds preposterously obvious, but the consequences of it are immense. Revelation is a natural act. Unveiling and veiling go on all the time. We take part in it, changing our vantage even as things around us change.

And a dynamic universe, one that is still changing as it seems to be, is by definition creating new things all the time. And invoking of One Love, everything is both subject and object, veiler and revealer. In short, all knowledge is revelation. No matter how we come to know it, every fact we have is revealed, and being revealed, it is also partial. Either the knowledge itself is incomplete, or our perception of it.

Now let's turn to the Bible. How shall we regard it from this new perspective? Grant that God gave it, how did it reach us? The Hebrew Bible was set down in Hebrew, from which it was translated into Greek and other languages. The language of the Christian Bible was set down in Greek. If it is literally true, then the first writers heard God without error, and the next copied it also without error, and the translators were equally also perfect. Any scholar knows that there are variant copies, divergent versions. It is remarkable they are so alike, but they are not alike.

Now consider that those who read it today must read it as perfectly as it was said to be written and then translated. Ultimately, the infallible Bible needs infallible

scribes, translators and readers. In the end, we cannot escape the limits of human thought, the possibility of error, and the fundamental hiddenness even in the revealed.

A mature idea of revelation accepts the universality of partial knowledge and the partiality of universal knowledge. Bibles are revealed, but so is science, and so is art, and so is history. Each is also hidden, incomplete in itself and incapable of being perfectly understood by us. Yet, we arrive at a workable sense of the whole. How? By those constant changes of vantage, comparisons of view, and the critical use of object permanence.

I call this attitude Critical Curiosity. It includes doubt but also interest, reason but also imagination. These and others are the tools used in testing the claims of all knowledge – not because they are better than the Bible, but because they are how we judge all knowledge, if there is One Truth.

So how do we do this? A parable may help. Through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, much of the American continent was uncharted to Europeans, so surveyors measured and marked the land. The process is quite simple. Start with two known places, triangulate on a third unknown place, and the third becomes known. By the careful use of the known, the unknown can become known. Our knowledge that there are other planets, for example, comes from the knowledge of how light behaves in the presence of gravity. Not all knowledge can be so scrupulously determined, but we can get closer.

What's more, with Fosdick I think a measure of cosmic uncertainty is good. It is morally good as those without doubt tend to tyranny of thought. It was not until the 1990s that the Roman Catholic Church officially accepted the fact that the earth revolves around the sun. What would have happened if they had been able to enforce that doctrine? Cosmic uncertainty is good practically, because when we do not doubt we do not learn, because everything needful is known. Just over a century ago the director of the US Patent Office suggested that the office be closed, as everything that could be invented had been.

The hiddenness of things is both humbling as Fosdick noted, and invigorating as Merleau-Ponty discerned. Inside such a universe, we go in hot pursuit of the truth, ever eager and also suspicious. We compare, consult, and contrast things we know, to find things we do not know. We put our knowledge into structures like Alexander Calder's mobiles, those balanced assortments of shapes and wires. Some things are large, and some small. Some are heavy and some light, but all can be brought into balance by placing them in the right configuration. It is always tentative because the future will unfold new that which was heretofore hidden. Then we must reconfigure the mobile of truth.

William James spoke of the universe as "ever not quite." That means both it and us. No doubt much anxiety comes from not knowing it all or well, but that also means life is not just a waiting station for some hereafter. "It is an adventure of the spirit," said Alfred North Whitehead, "a flight after the unattainable."