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Selflessness: Shadows in the Mirror

*We are no other than a moving row
of magic shadow-shapes that come and go.*

– *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyan*¹

My eyes open. I gaze around the dark kuti (meditation hut) where I'd been sleeping. Outside the window the sky has turned from black to pre-dawn deep gray. Inside, the clock says 4:30. I'm wide-awake. I pull on my clothes and slip out the door quietly so as not to disturb my roommate.

Outside, the moon is full and bright on the western horizon. Moisture hangs in the cool mountain air. Cicada and crickets are loud. A dog barks a half-mile away. The world is lovely and precious. Life is lovely and precious.

I've always loved being up in the hours before dawn. Some people are night people – they come alive in the late evening. Some are morning people. I guess I'm a pre-morning person. I always have been. Even as a teenager, if I had a lot of homework, I'd go to bed early and get up at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning to do my studies.

I don't think our spirits – our life force – ever sleeps. But at night, our worries and fears, our aspirations and ambitions slumber. Except for occasional dreams, our egos and sense of self relax. The collective human psyche is tranquil. The ether feels silky and smooth.

In the wee hours of the night, nobody asks me to be anything. There is no place I have to go, nothing I have to be. I can be nobody and it's just fine. The "Doug" that I try to be fades into irrelevance.

Outside my kuti, I smile gently as I walk up the little hill to the main building. I climb the outside stairs that lead up to a second story deck. I like to meditate in a library off that deck. But instead, I walk to the edge of the railing and gaze across the moonlit Ozark Mountain woodland.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: "Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."

Years ago when I first came across this passage in his essay on nature I pictured that transparent eyeball suspended in the air like a damp volleyball with the optic nerve and blood vessels tangling behind it.

¹ Translated by Edward Fitzgerald (The Peter Pauper Press: Mount Vernon, New York.)

It's an awkward and grotesque image. I wondered, "What is he talking about?"

So I sat with the image and the other words: transparent, egotism vanishes, being nothing, seeing all, currents of the universal flowing through ... I thought, "Emerson was a far out dude. He's describing the experience of selflessness. He was a Yankee mystic."

Ralph Waldo Emerson died on April 27, 1882. I was born on April 27, 1948. The anniversary of his death and the anniversary of my birth are the same. I'd like to think I'm a reincarnation of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I don't believe it for a moment. But I like to think it. He's my Unitarian hero. I'd like to be like him when I grow up.

Even more, I'd love to sit in the blithe mountain air and have a quiet conversation: "Waldo," (he preferred to be called "Waldo" rather than "Ralph"), "Waldo, can you tell me more about what you experienced when you wrote about being transparent? Can I tell you a few things I've experienced and hear what you think about them?"

But he's not here. I can't speak with him. So I sit on the top step, open my journal in the dim moon light and begin to write:

It takes a lot of heart to destroy ourselves – to witness the mind and consciousness dissolving into infinite space, to become a transparent nothing who is part and parcel of everything.

It can't be done with will power. That would be relatively easy. Will is the bastion of the opaque self. It can be done with relaxation and letting go. Surrender is the bastion of the heart.

It's not glorious. Glory is the realm of the ego.

And it doesn't make us anybody special. It just makes us a nobody, another critter in the forest at one with all the other critters.

But at some point, what else is there to do?

Selflessness

This morning I'm starting a series of sermons on selflessness. I could have called the series "transparent eyeballs" or "self-dissolving" or "merging with the divine" or "oneness." But those sound esoteric. Selflessness is simple and common. Standing on the bare earth or standing on the second story deck, our bodies don't vanish in a puff of mythical magic. But the density and insistence of selfhood fades a bit – becomes more transparent.

The term "selflessness" connotes other qualities that are part of the experience: compassion, openness, simplicity, depth and spaciousness – the sense that life is lovely and precious.

I raise this topic not just because mystical experiences are cool – which they are. I raise it out of urgency.

We have many urgent problems: the species extinction rate has skyrocketed; we're burning through the earth's resources one and a half times faster than she can replace them; our economic system is a Rube Goldberg contraption barely held together with chicken wire; our political system is seizing up in gridlock.

When we look around at the human collective, it's clear that we're going through a transformation. There are so many of us that we all live in each other's backyards. Disparate cultures that used to be far distant are now sitting in each other's laps. Television, cell phones, the Internet and other technologies link us more intimately than ever.

Any transformation holds both promise and peril. But the greatest perils we face are not natural disasters. They are manmade disasters that grow out of a hyper-developed sense of self: The ecological crisis comes from too much emphasis on “what I want now” and not enough on what’s sustainable. Political gridlock is too many childish egos – like Nero playing his lyre as Rome burns. Economic crisis is rooted in greed.

Selflessness arises easily and naturally as the human spirit matures. Selflessness won’t solve all the specific problems we face in this time of transition. But it provides an environment within which urgently needed remedies are easier to find.

Context

So this morning I’d like us to get our toes wet in the waters of selflessness (to use another awkward metaphor).

This series is an extension of the series I did last spring on God and consciousness (we have printed copies of those in the library if you are interested). In that series we asked the most basic spiritual question: “What is ultimately most important in life?” or “What is ultimately most real?”

The answers we give to this question are our functional equivalent of God regardless of beliefs we claim or disclaim.

We can look for answers in three different places. We can look inside ourselves. This is an inner or first person approach. Spiritual practices in this tradition include meditation and contemplation that explore our inner worlds.

We can also look for answers in how we relate to one another and to life in general. This is a relational or second

person approach. Spiritual practices include dialog, prayer, chanting, channeling and devotion.

We can also look for answers by stepping back and objectively observing around us. This is the objective or third person approach. Practices include reason, science and inquiry.

All three perspectives are perfectly valid because life includes all three at once. We all experience a self. We all relate to life. And we all observe an objective world around us. We live in all three perspectives at once.

The Emerson quote includes all three: “mean egotism vanishes” is first person internal; “currents of the Universal being circulating through me” is second person relational; “I see all” is third person objective.

Unitarian Universalism is open to all three perspectives, though many lean more toward the third person objective. Still, we value self expression and caring for one another and the larger world.

Not committing to any one perspective has the advantage of keeping us open to all approaches – something we value. It has the disadvantage of not encouraging depth in any one area – something we tolerate.

If we do engage in any of the three perspectives, it unfolds and deepens. If we keep hopping back and forth from one to the other, we remain spiritual dilatants. We probably won’t mature.

For those who would like to go further, I want to encourage you to engage in a practice that resonates with you if you don’t already.

Toward this end, in the next three sermons, I’ll offer a practice from each perspective.

Practices Self-Destruct

Full spiritual practices eventually destroy what they explore. First person inner practices explore the nature of the self. As we see more clearly how the mind creates a sense of self, that self dissolves and disappears. I'll share how this works in Buddhist meditation.

Second person relational practices emphasize our relationship to God or Spirit or ultimacy. As these practices deepen, we end up merging with the ultimate – the relationship evaporates as we become what we once related to. To explore this I'll talk about channeling – a New Age practice of talking with and embodying wisdom beyond ourselves. I expect channeling will raise a few skeptical eyebrows. So we'll have some fun with it.

Third person objective practices emphasize seeing the world objectively. As the practices deepen, objectivity disappears and we become one with the universe. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle, quantum mechanics and advanced physics demonstrate the limits of objectivity. The ancient church knew it too. So I'll offer a Medieval practice called *apophasis* that uses internal logical discourse to quickly take us to the limits of what reason can manage and keeps going. It's a wonderful practice that makes Zen koans seem obvious.

Absence

But before we get to these specific practices, this morning I'd like us to get comfortable with selflessness itself. I'd like us to increase our capacity to recognize the experience when it arises spontaneously.

The difficulty with putting our finger on selflessness is that it's not a thought, belief or even a feeling as much as it's the absence of a way of thinking,

the absence of holding onto beliefs and the absence of certain feelings. It's more like a mood that arises when there is nothing in its way. In those wee hours of the morning in the absence of daily pressures, selflessness arises more easily in some of us.

It may help us to further identify this mood by talking about its opposite – self-consciousness.

Take a moment to remember a time when you were strongly feeling self-conscious ... What are some of the qualities of this hyper-self-awareness? ... Go ahead and call them out ...

Painful
Dense
Young
Sad
Worried
Tight
Holding
Doubt

...

Now think of a time when you were feeling relatively selfless. ... What are some of its qualities? ...

Expansive
Relaxed
Compassionate
Out flowing
Ease
Heartful
Boundless

Which do you prefer? ...

Selflessness is imbued with so much wisdom and wellbeing that we wonder, "Why we don't spend more time there?"

Evolution

Part of the answer, as I mentioned earlier, is it is difficult to put our finger on the absence of something. And that's what selflessness is: the absence of the dense feeling of selfhood.

Another part of the answer is the dense feeling and belief in selfhood have been bred into us in the course of evolution. A strong sense of self helps a relatively immature mind process a lot of information quickly. Several hundred thousand years ago, this gave us a survival edge:

Imagine two guys walking through the pre-historic woodland. Each happens upon a saber tooth tiger. The first person has no psychological sense of self. He views the situation clearly and dispassionately: "This hungry carnivore is looking for a source of protein to assuage its instinctual appetite. It's eying my body to satisfy this urge. Let me consider what is the greater good – feeding the big kitty or getting away?" No sense of self.

The second person has a strong sense of self. His thoughts are dense, focused, simple, practical and enhanced by fear: "I want to live!"

Regardless of the philosophical merits of these two sets of thoughts, the first person is more likely to be lunch for the beast while the second is more likely to pass his DNA on to the next generation. His way of thinking is more likely to survive.

When we were a small, puny, marginal species, our effect on the larger ecosystem was trivial. Having an intense focus on "me, myself and mine" and treating everything else as irrelevant gave our DNA a survival edge.

Today, when we are the top dogs with technologically enhanced prowess to radically change the eco-system, the same narcissism and stupidity are more and more lethal.

Developmental

When we were children and our minds were relatively immature, a healthy sense of self helped us manage complex situations less dramatic than tigers. When I was a child walking into the kitchen from the backyard, I had to remember to wipe the dirt off my sneakers, close the door, don't let it slam, make sure the screen is latched so the mosquitoes don't get in, wash my hands before I eat, and more. It was a lot to keep track of. But the sense of self helped process the situation quickly. All I had to do was remember, "I'm a good boy," and this shorthand reminded me of all I should do. That sense of self was a synthesis of all that information.

Human intelligence is more general than specific. We don't have specific instinct that says, "I'm a body" or "I'm these feelings" or "I'm a set of behaviors." We have a generalized capacity to think, "I am a dense, separate, independent self that is more important than anything else."

This is helpful developmentally. But as we grow into adults, hopefully we recognize the interdependent web in which we are imbedded. There is more to consider in life than just our bodies, pride, self-image and emotions. Our wellbeing is intertwined with many others. Having a strong sense of self becomes a distortion – it limits the breadth of our wisdom.

Fortunately, we do have the capacities for empathy, cooperation, ease, humility and seeing the big picture. We just need to cultivate them.

So as we mature spiritually and cultivate a mind-heart that is quiet, attentive, relaxed and engaged, we find more effective ways to process information quickly than "me, myself and mine." Self-sense and its clumsiness

lightens and fades into selflessness. Of course we can still speak of “I” and “me” and “you” as a social convention. But they are light and easygoing.

Recognizing

One way to do cultivate selflessness is to recognize the mood when it arises spontaneously. Since selflessness is an absence, it doesn’t draw attention to itself. So it helps to intentionally notice as it waxes and wanes through the day. Or, as we lie in bed before going to sleep at night, we can take a few minutes to remember when that day our sense of self was denser and when it was lighter.

As we recognize its texture and feel, it is easier to lean in that direction – to relax the tension of self-consciousness and spread out into a broader, deeper, more intelligent wellbeing.

We can do it right now by remembering what it feels like and softening into it. Let’s do this in silence together.

...

Life is lovely and precious.

...

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote:

In humility is the greatest freedom. As long as you have to defend the imaginary self that you think is important, you lose

your peace of heart. As soon as you compare that shadow with the shadow of other people, you lose all joy, because you have begun to trade in unrealities and there is no joy in things that do not exist.

Song

Go Lifted Up

*Sweet quiet, Boundless sea,
Where joy and grief are the same,
Endless sky, pale breeze of dawn,
Breathe your light into me.*

Closing

Selflessness is not something we can hold onto. It is the absence of holding on.

The old minister kneeled down beside the altar moaning aloud, “I’m nobody, I’m nobody, I’m nobody.”

The deacon kneeled down next to him and cried, “I’m nobody, I’m nobody, I’m nobody.”

The janitor kneeled down next to the deacon and murmured, “I’m nobody, I’m nobody, I’m nobody.”

The deacon turned to the minister and said, “Look who thinks he’s nobody.”

In true selflessness, we can’t even hold onto being nobody.

Go in peace.