

The Search for Wholeness

It's amazing how many different opinions there seem to be about the nature of religion. It is, simply put, the search for wholeness. That's what the word means. From the Latin, it combines "re" meaning either "again" or "return to a prior state," and "ligio," which means "to bind together," and is found in words like ligament and ligature.

So religion means "to bind together something that was once whole." One widespread metaphor for this theme is healing the separation between humans and God. But even more enduring is the theme of romantic love between a woman and a man, symbolizing the two sides of human nature. This has endured as a part of every religious tradition and has produced some of the most evocative imagery.

Muslims, especially the Sufis, have emphasized this metaphor of seeking wholeness beyond the narrow self. The Sufi poet, Hafiz, wrote:

There is a Beautiful Creature
Living in a hole you have dug.

So at night
I set fruit and grains
And little pots of wine and milk
Beside your soft earthen mounds,

And I often sing.

But still, my dear,
You do not come out.

I have fallen in love with Someone
Who hides inside you.

We should talk about this problem –

Otherwise,

I will never leave you alone.

And in another place, Hafiz wrote:

There is a game we should play,

And it goes like this:

We hold hands and look into each other's eyes

And scan each other's face.

Then I say,

“Now tell me a difference you see between us.”

And you might respond,

“Hafiz, your nose is ten times bigger than mine!”

Then I would say,

“Yes, my dear, almost ten times!”

But let's keep playing.

Let's go deeper,

Go deeper.

For if we do,

Our spirits will embrace

And interweave.

Our union will be so glorious

That even God

Will not be able to tell us apart.

There is a wonderful game
We should play with everyone
And it goes like this . . .

This longing for wholeness through relationship is vividly expressed in ancient Egyptian theology through the story of Isis and Osiris. When I first learned about them I thought it was odd that gods who were brother and sister would also be lovers, but realized that was a problem only if I took the story literally rather than as a metaphor.

As metaphor, Isis and Osiris represent the divine union of dual human nature represented by female and male principles: beauty and action, acceptance and judgment, creativity and intellect.

Isis was the firstborn daughter of the primal gods of the earth and the sky. As such, she was the most powerful of Egyptian gods, so powerful that her worship spread all over the Mediterranean and become one of the main religions of the Roman Empire.

She is a moon goddess who gave birth to Horus, the god of the sun. Isis taught women to grind corn, bake bread, spin flax, weave cloth, and, maybe most importantly, she taught them to tame the men so the women could live with them. She was also the goddess of medicine, healing, fertility, and wisdom.

Isis married her brother, Osiris, and together they ruled the earth in wisdom and harmony. But this was not to last, because their brother, Set, was jealous and plotted Osiris' murder, chopping him into 14 pieces which he scattered all along the Nile river in hope that Osiris would never again be whole.

Isis was stricken with grief. Lacking half of the divine nature, the land fell into disarray, quarrels turned into fights and wars, droughts plagued the crops and famine crept among the people. Determined to restore order, Isis spent years searching along the Nile to find the pieces of Osiris scattered there, seeking to “re-member” her lost partner.

She eventually gathered 13 pieces, almost all, and the power of her divine love was enough to make him whole again and together they conceived a son, Horus.

This is a powerful story with vivid imagery of love, betrayal and reconciliation. Painted images of Isis holding her son, Horus, were later said to be Mary and the baby Jesus. Pictures of Isis holding the body of her dead husband became Mary with the body of Jesus.

But the deeper psychological principle embodied in this story is the necessity of union between the two sides of human nature: tranquility and action, creativity and intellect, faith and fear. Left to itself, the principles of intellect, competition, and survival can take themselves too seriously and when they do, they project their concerns into every corner of activity, splitting the self into 14 or more separate pieces, losing link with the principles of peace and love which hold them in check and give their work true meaning. The parts then lose their connection with the whole and it is religion's job to bind them together again like Isis did with Osiris.

These themes are also embedded in the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve are the archetypal couple in this version, living together in peace, harmony, and effortless prosperity. There's been a lot of misunderstanding about this story, with people claiming that the original sin was disobedience, but remember what Adam and Eve acquired: the knowledge of good and evil – right and wrong. Once they had an external standard of behavior against which they measured themselves, they lost their original wholeness because the act of observing and judging creates an observer of self that is separate from the self. This fractures the self into two parts and results in paradise lost. When Jesus said, "Judge not, lest you be judged," he was teaching a way to mend this split self. When he said that no one would enter the kingdom unless they became as little children, he was inviting us to the holy inner marriage of the undivided self, a self made whole again.

The Sufi poet, Rumi, referred to this when he said, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I will meet you there. When the soul

lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase ‘each other’ doesn’t make any sense.”

The great African-American sociologist, W.E.B. Dubois, wrote about a special version of this split in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. He describes “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”

This double self is created in a people forever unable to forget that they must see themselves as others see them, that there is no safety in authenticity, a fugitive people always aware that they need to judge themselves by the perceptions of others.

This powerful insight eventually leads us to understand the damage done by creating classes of people as “other,” as different by definition. We do this, not only by seeing people as black, but by seeing them as handicapped, disabled, ugly, or fat, or stupid, or anything else. Every category by which we classify people as “other” splits our wholeness as surely as Osiris was chopped into bits.

And every act of creating “others” is derived from the primary creation of our self as “other,” through the imposition of an arbitrary morality. Can you remember when you experienced your first shock of separation from your own wholeness? For most of us, it happened at such an early age that we can’t recall. But I can remember early feelings of rejection, when I experienced myself as “bad,” or “other.”

I had two older sisters who played with dolls. I wanted to play with them, too, so I wanted a doll of my own. They told me I couldn’t have a doll; that all dolls were girls and boys couldn’t have dolls. I remember the pain of being told that my difference was unacceptable. My parents also taught me that I needed to

behave in certain ways to be acceptable – my father even told me to “watch myself.” So I did, and in so doing I left the Eden of wholeness and innocence. And created a longing to regain what was lost.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes, “I yearn to be whole, but dividedness often seems the easier choice. A ‘still, small voice’ speaks the truth about me, my work, or the world. I hear it and yet act as if I did not. I withhold a personal gift that might serve a good end or commit myself to a project that I do not believe in. . . I deny my inner darkness, giving it more power over me, or I project it onto other people, creating ‘enemies’ where none exist.

“I pay a steep price when I live a divided life – feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood. The people around me pay a price as well, for now they walk on ground made unstable by my dividedness. How can I affirm another’s identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another’s integrity when I defy my own? A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open – divorcing my words and my actions from the truth I hold within – things around me get shaky and start to fall apart.”

I remember one favorite example of the comic strip called, “Family Circus.” It shows a mother driving a station wagon while a toddler sits in a safety seat in back with a toy steering wheel. All around the mother’s head are cloud-like balloons of her thoughts: laundry, groceries, dry cleaner, school bus, meals to cook, cleaning to do, and more. Above the toddler’s head there is only one balloon: it simply shows the child in the seat holding the wheel. The child thoughts are not divided, they accurately mirror its experience; the mother is split into many pieces.

In *The Book of Awakening*, Mark Nepo writes that, “Try as we will, we cannot be both participant and observer at the same time without splitting ourselves. Madness it seems is the cost of splitting ourselves in the midst of our experience. To dwell on our next gesture or reply while a truth is being shared splits the heart’s capacity to feel.”

This is the essential work of religion, and the reason for spiritual practices: the search for wholeness. We can deeply feel our longing for unity, but we rarely

know how to achieve it. Many of the religions upon which our culture is built cling to the idea that this is not a problem to be solved; that we are inherently and hopelessly broken. It's as though Isis and Osiris forgot they were ever married.

Spiritual teachers keep reminding us, though, and they've been doing it for a very long time. In the fifth century, Sengstan, the third Zen patriarch, wrote: "To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. When the deep meaning of things is not understood the mind's essential peace is disturbed to no avail. . . To come directly into harmony with this reality just simply say when doubts arise, "not two." In this "not two" nothing is separate, nothing is excluded. No matter when or where, enlightenment means entering this truth."

This is why spiritual practice always seems odd to the rational mind, to left hemisphere of the brain that is forever analyzing and calculating difference. Spiritual practices call us to open to our right hemisphere functions of hope, creativity, and wholeness. This is the true, deep answer to our quest.

Not all spiritual practices work for everyone, that's why there are so many. Parker Palmer suggests a kind of practice that seems different, but is just as challenging to follow. He calls them "circles of trust," composed of people committed to growth in truth, authenticity, and wholeness. They would embody what the poet Ranier Maira Rilke described as "the love that consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other." Palmer says that "a circle of trust consists of relationships that are neither invasive nor evasive. In this space, we neither invade the mystery of another's true self nor evade another's struggles. We stay present to each other without wavering, while stifling any impulse to fix each other up. We offer each other support in going where each needs to go, and learning what each needs to learn, at each one's pace and depth."

He goes on to say that this is a discipline of a kind of love, "a love that requires us to treat the soul as an end in itself. We so often relate to each other as a means to our own ends, extending 'respect' to each other in hopes of getting something for ourselves."

What is this but a way of walking the walk of our first principle: affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of each person? No judging, no separation – not two – but one in the moment, in perception, in experience.

As Hafiz wrote, “Let’s keep playing. Let’s go deeper, Go deeper. For if we do, our spirits will embrace and interweave. Our union will be so glorious that even God will not be able to tell us apart.

There is a wonderful game we should play with everyone and it goes like this . . .