

Sermon: Loving, Creative Energy

John Caldwell, January 28, 2018

I'm going to begin this sermon with a question: What is God? Of course, the answer that is the most familiar to me is "God is love". That comes from John's first letter, the fourth chapter, and is one of the most familiar quotes that I know of: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." But there is another statement that John makes, and that comes in the first chapter of the same letter. This one is much less familiar to me and does not seem to be a passage that is talked about all that much: "God is light." The passage reads, "This is the message we have heard from him (Jesus) and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

So, it appears to me that you could say that the being we call "God" could also be referred to as "Loving, Creative Energy." So, if we live in Loving, Creative Energy and Loving, Creative Energy lives in us, then what is the ultimate function of that Energy? How does this energy act in us? I'm going to leave that question for the moment.

There is another saying that has fascinated me for a number of years. It comes from a bumper sticker that was attached to the cab of David Edwards' old pickup truck. I don't have a clue who might have written it. Does anyone remember that truck and the words of wisdom it carried? They are as follows, "We are here to overcome the illusion of separateness." I was sorry that sticker went with the truck when he sold it. I believe, and my life has confirmed (for me at least), that we are here to overcome all illusions, separateness being one of them, that a deep and thorough understanding of ourselves, and all of life, is our destiny. And, furthermore, that life is going to push us continuously to achieve that wisdom, sometimes, maybe many times, past the limit of what we think of as tolerable.

So, it does not surprise me when it turns out that, in lots of cases, the most difficult of experiences end up being the ones that have the most to teach us. This is the story of, very possibly, the most difficult event of my life, and it is something of a dog story.

I was about 4 years old. My family (that would be my parents, my sister, who was 2 ½ years older than me, and I) was living out in the country north east of Baltimore on Lilac Lane off of Joppa Road. It was something of an enclave where lots of my relatives lived also. One day, my father brought home a dog. This was totally "out of the blue", a surprise to everyone. I have no idea what possessed him to do that, especially since this particular dog was rather big. His name was Remus. I later learned that Remus was a special kind of dog that had its own special name. He was called a bullmastiff. Remus was also not much more than one year old, and so was rather spunky.

I think that it became obvious rather quickly that Remus just did not fit our situation, and he went back to the kennel. I don't even remember the dog really. There were stories about him that I heard many times over the years, but my memories of him are almost nil. Actually, I think I was pretty torn up over losing him because what I do remember is the conclusion that I came to as a result of the experience, which was: daddy brought home a dog, therefore, it is ok to have a dog. The other part of my understanding was that dogs come in different sizes, and, since Remus was too big, it should be just fine to get a smaller dog. All of that led to an intense but short-lived campaign to get another dog. But my mother was having none of it. The idea had become totally unacceptable, and no amount of pouting or pointing out the logic of my position was going to get me another dog. I just had to give it up.

A couple years later we had to move to a place called Alexandria. That was because there was a place called the Pentagon where my father was working and it was not too far from there. The following year we moved to Fairfax County. I was in second grade and a member of the cub scouts. We, the scout troupe, were on a drive to earn some money by collecting newspapers. At one house a man came to the door, and, after I had introduced myself, he said. "I don't have any newspapers, but I have some puppies. Would you like a puppy?"

That was it. I was gone, running through back yards, climbing fences. I made it home in probably about a minute. And then it was, "Mommy, the man said I could have a puppy. Can I have a puppy? Please, please, please, please." It was too much to hope for, but she didn't flat out reject the idea. She said, "We'll wait 'till your father gets home and see what he says." I couldn't believe it when he agreed. I finally had my dog, only this time it

seemed like it really was my dog. He was mostly boxer and all black except for some white on his toes, so I called him Mittens. I know, really dumb name, right? Ok, I was 7.

The following year my father got transferred to Tyndall Air Force Base. I had attended several weeks of third grade, and then we were on the road again, this time to Florida. The area where we lived was nice. These were officers' quarters. In fact, my father was second in command on the base. I particularly remember how sometimes mittens would be out roaming the neighborhood since the yards were not fenced. I would get off the bus after school, whistle and shout, and he would come running down the street as fast as he could go.

The year was pushing on toward Thanksgiving when, one day, I was not feeling so good. On the way back from a Cub Scout meeting I laid down on the back seat of the car. The next day I had a fever and began to feel sick to my stomach. My mother took me to the base hospital to see what a doctor might say. The fellow we saw seemed somewhat cavalier about my state and said, without anything like an exam, "He has the flue. Take him home."

Those were the words that set me up for an experience that changed my life. The condition got steadily worse that day. I could keep nothing down and the vomiting continued about once an hour even though there was nothing in my stomach. Later that night a new symptom appeared. It was becoming difficult and painful to urinate. This developed until I could no longer pass urine at all, and any attempt to do that was accompanied by screaming. It was now obvious that this was not the flue and we were on our way back to the hospital.

I think it was past 11 o'clock when we arrived. My father parked the car, scooped me up off the back seat, and started into the hospital. I could tell he was trying to be careful not to jar me, but I could feel by his movements that he was almost running with me. But there was another sensation, something very odd. Even though I was not used to this other feeling, I knew immediately what it was, and I could tell where it was coming from. It was his caring, it was his concern for me, and it was coming from his body, in fact, I could feel it radiating from the middle of his chest.

This was a surprise, almost a shock, to me. I realized two things in that instant. The first was that I had a definite need for that loving energy.

The second was that it had not been obvious at all that that sort of caring actually existed. In fact, I had already given up on ever receiving that kind of nurturing. I had had to shut off that need, to suppress it and forget that that sort of loving energy was a part of reality. But there it was. I could feel it.

This experience is interesting to me on a number of levels but none any more than that it is a perfect example of the way our psyche functions. We have a defense system that can block experiences, automatically and with no conscious awareness, when those experiences are so painful, and/or terrifying, that they threaten to destroy us. It looks to me like one major purpose of my condition, at that point, was to punch a large hole in the barrier that separates the conscious mind from the unconscious, so that I would be able to rediscover a very important aspect of the real self, of who I really am.

In the hospital the nightmare continued. It seemed that, after people realized that something had to be done, most likely surgery, there was lots of activity. I was examined both inside and out. At one point someone did a rectal exam which definitely did not feel good. I was ravenously hungry, but could have nothing to eat. They brought me some ice chips to chew and suck on, but that didn't last very long, and I couldn't have any more. Then there was just waiting. Of course, my parents were doing everything they could to comfort and distract me.

Finally, the waiting was over. It must have been getting close to two o'clock in the morning when some people came and put me on a gurney. We started down the ward, and that's all I remember. I suppose exhaustion and, possibly, the movement of the gurney, combined to put me to sleep. I never saw the inside of the operating room. I woke up the next day minus one appendix and with an incision on my right side that was all sewn together with some sort of heavy thread. The crisis seemed to be over. I was tired but a lot more comfortable than I had been the day before.

I learned some new words while in the hospital. Appendix was one of them. Another one was peritonitis. That was not something that I had, but it was the reason I could not go home for a while. It was also the reason I had to get three injections of antibiotics a day. The doctors were afraid that I might come down with this condition, since I had had such a bad infection. I felt like this was adding insult to injury. I had gotten through all the pain and

terror of emergency surgery in the middle of the night only to be stuck like a pin cushion for the next two weeks.

Finally, it was over. It was time to go home. But my special nightmare was not quite over. At home, our carport led to the kitchen door. I could see Mittens lying on a mat not far from the door. When I got out of the car he didn't get up. I went over to him. He raised his head, and I gave him a scratch. He wagged his tail a little bit, but he didn't get up. If I had let my mind go there, I would have had to say that he seemed too weak to get up. But I simply couldn't go there. I couldn't let myself even imagine that some other horrendous event might be lumbering toward me. I went into the house telling myself that he was ok, that he must have been really tired. I was home, everything was ok now.

But Mittens was not ok, he was sick. With all my problems, and the time and energy that had to go into taking care of them, the dog didn't get much attention. Now that I was home my parents were able to take him to the vet. But it was too late. Two, or maybe three, days after I got home my dog died.

Of course, there were tears. This was way too much. This was more than unfair, it was cruel. How could life be so brutal, so horrible? But it seems that, after all the nastiness that I had already experienced, I simply didn't have the energy to dwell on the situation. I had to distract myself, and it was time to go back to school, to be a cub scout, to climb trees and play with friends. I was able to do that.

I could never forget the experiences I had just had, but that same protective mechanism that separates our psyche into conscious and unconscious aspects can remove the horribly painful effects of experiences, even though we can remember the events, and store that pain away until we have the strength to deal with it honestly and thoroughly. And this unearthing and reconnecting is always something that needs to happen one way or another. Otherwise, it stays buried inside us, and we have to fight to keep it suppressed for the rest of our lives. This takes a tremendous toll on us in a variety of ways.

Until I began examining these memories and writing them down, a lot of the pain associated with them seemed to be stored away waiting to be released. This has been a seriously painful project. On the other hand, it has merely been an extension of the road I have been traveling for the past 45

years, and, simply, the most recent example of the many experiences I have had, related to the process of draining my particular accumulation of buried pain. This is the path to wholeness, to becoming again as a child. It is the conquering, and elimination, of fear. It is the dying of, one could easily say the "crucifixion" of, the false, fragmented self. This is the path that leads us to real, eternal life.

Thomas Keating makes a statement in his book entitled "Open Mind: Open Heart": "The disintegrating and dying of our false self is our participation in the passion and death of Jesus. The building of our new self, based on the transforming power of divine love, is our participation in his risen life." Active participation is the key here. Belief requires action, effort. Jesus (and other spiritual masters as well) may point us in the right direction, but we have to climb the sacred mountain ourselves.

This, of course, is frequently very scary and a tremendous load of hard work. But, eventually, through the process of internal reintegration, of personal connectedness, we realize that same connectedness in the world around us. When we begin to experience, to perceive, to recognize the Loving, Creative Energy that lives within us, we see it everywhere, in everyone. And, we may very well develop the ability to direct that energy for the benefit of our world. Remember that Jesus was talking to, and about, people that took his teachings seriously, people who had every intention to "take up the cross" and "become again as little children" when he said: "Truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, ..." That sounds, to me, like something that is definitely worth the effort.