

Matter-Made-Conscious

by Donne Hayden

Writer and naturalist Annie Dillard has a delightful way of putting things, and I would like to begin today by reading one of my favorite passages from her book, *Teaching A Stone To Talk*, referring to our human tendency to underestimate the power of the Nameless One:

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?

...
Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.¹

Though we may smile, this passage brings up something we don't talk about much: the notion that the Divine is a potentially dangerous and destructive power, not our "good buddy."

Twenty years ago, in a canoe on a small lake just off the only river that runs through southern Arizona, I experienced an epiphany about the creative nature of the universe. I was staring down into the water beside the canoe which rocked gently with the movement of the water. Light glinted off the water in places; in other places rays of golden light streamed down into the weedy lake water. Tiny zigzagging insects darted and fish of different shapes and colors swam among the rippling feathery greenery below. I suddenly had a SENSE—not a vision, but an *understanding* of the Creative Energy behind everything.

I sensed that it was *feminine, artistic and conscious*—exuberant in its delight in experimenting with all the possibilities in the palette of creation. Unlike the palette of a human artist who uses color to *mimic* light, shadow, and form, the Creator's palette is *living* color, and not only color, but myriad patterns and forms, constantly changing light and shadow, movement

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), pages 52-53.

itself, and sound! I imagined the Feminine Creative Energy trying out this color combination with that flash of light, this odd form with that speckled pattern, maybe stripes this time; this graceful flash, that sluggish lurch, a twitter, a splatter, soft cooing . . . Combining all these elements of matter and motion in infinite variety and with exquisite joy. And then it occurred to me—what if intelligence and consciousness are other “colors” in the Creator’s palette? What if the Divine Mystery, the Nameless One, infuses *some* organic matter with intelligence and consciousness for added depth and complexity on the canvas of Creation? What if we humans are *matter-made-conscious*?

To explore this idea, imagine with me, a leaf with consciousness. In the spring, it begins as a tiny, tightly rolled bud—a baby, just coming into existence, aware mostly of the twig it grows on. Our leaf-with-consciousness gradually opens, unfurls into a leaf-shape. It is young, vital, all the juices from its source pumping through it, sunlight is its friend, helping it to create food and sustain itself. At the same time this leaf-bud is opening, it becomes aware that a nearby bud, too eager to burst forth, was nipped by a late frost; while our leaf grows stronger, the nearby bud turns brown and doesn’t unfurl at all. “Too bad,” thinks our leaf. “How sad. He was so young . . .”

Summer comes, and the leaf is broad and glossy on its branch, surrounded by other leaves—friends and neighbors, all so beautiful and green. Then one day a catastrophe occurs; a human arrives with a large cutting tool, and with a sudden Whack! an entire community of leaves on a neighboring branch is gone—wiped out entirely. “Such a tragedy,” our leaf murmurs. “All that life wasted . . .” But the summer sun is warm, the tree’s sap is nutritious, and our leaf’s life goes on. As August comes, the heat of the sun becomes more intense, and our leaf wilts a bit in the daytime, though it recovers in the cool nights. “Boy,” it thinks, “the sun didn’t used to affect me this way.” But, still in its prime, our leaf continues to be glad to see the sun each day.

September comes and the refreshing nights become a bit more uncomfortable for the leaf; it greets the sun each morning with some relief. Until one night, moisture in the air, which

has always before refreshed the leaf, becomes heavy with small crystals of ice. The leaf discovers its edges are deadened and curling up, and it aches. Still green at the center, the leaf notices other leaves, some almost entirely brown or gold or red, beautiful to it in an entirely different way that is slightly sad. One day, the leaf, chilled and suffering as its extremities curl tighter and tighter toward its center, discovers it is virtually alone on its twig. Most of its friends and neighbors have dropped to the ground and rest brown and lifeless at the foot of the tree. “Oh my friends,” our leaf murmurs. “Oh the sadness . . . All gone. How could a loving Creator allow such suffering and loss? How long must I cling here alone?”

And that brings us to the quality of the Nameless One that we have the most trouble with. For living creatures, destruction brings pain, sorrow, suffering and eventually death. For *conscious* creatures, like humans, it brings all these—pain, sorrow, suffering and death—as well as laments about fairness, justification, necessity, etc. It brings rage and outrage; it brings doubts about the goodness of the Nameless One, the Creative Source.

Though we humans engage in destruction all the time—chopping down trees that took centuries to grow, butchering animals so that we may eat, dropping bombs on people we don’t know—we find it difficult to accept a Creator that permits someone or something else to destroy us or those we love. (We Americans, in fact, almost seem to consider illness and death a violation of our *rights*.) Because death, destruction and suffering exist, some people consider that evidence that a loving Creator cannot exist; if God does exist, they say, God is not good. Alternatively, if a loving God does exist, that God is not omnipotent because a good God would not permit suffering.

Let’s think about this objectively.

First, consider what would happen to Creation without destruction—if nothing ever died or faded or decayed away. Constant creation with no destruction. Even a *universe* would soon fill up with created stuff. Nature shows us that creation is a cycle, and destruction is part of the

cycle. Creation and destruction are not separate—as is true for so many opposites, one cannot exist without the other.

We are made of matter, and on earth, as part of Nature’s cycle, all things made of matter—rocks, plants, animals—must eventually erode, die, decay and go away, so that there is room for new matter always being created. Our material bodies must follow the laws of physics and other laws of materiality. For instance, the Law of Conservation of Matter states that during an ordinary chemical change, there is no detectable increase or decrease in the quantity of matter.² When we die, physically, materially, all the water in our body dries up and we return to dust. (Babies’ bodies are about 78% water, adult bodies about 55-60%.³)

Our life force, however, is not made of matter, but *energy*; we are powered by electromagnetic energy, which also follows essential laws of physics. The Law of Conservation of Energy states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, though it can change its form.⁴ Essentially, our understanding of physics tells us that the total quantity of matter and energy available in the universe is a fixed amount and never any more or less. The spark of energy, the spark of intelligence, the spark of consciousness that powers our body—this energy changes form, leaving behind the collection of dust and water which was the physical self. The only difference is in its form. As *matter-made-conscious*, we humans are aware of the process in the cycle of our creation, the change in our form, including the decline and decay of our physical self and the loss of that particular location for our soul’s energy or consciousness.

Dust returns to dust, and energy to energy. Our energy includes intelligence, consciousness, awareness—what I would call a Soul—which I believe does not disappear into

²“Law of Conservation of Energy” and “Law of Conservation of Matter,” *Car-tage.org.lb* website, <http://www.cartage.org.lb/en/themes/Sciences/Chemistry/Generalchemistry/Energy/LawofConser-vation/LawofConservation.htm>. Also *Science Clarified* website, <http://www.sci-enceclarified.com/Ci-Co/Conservation-Laws.html>.

³ According to neuroscientist Jeffrey Utz, M.D., of Allegheny University on *MadSci Network: Anatomy*. Response to query: “What percentage of the human body is composed of water?” Posted on May 15, 2000 on <http://www.madsci.org/posts/archives/2000-05/958588306.An.r.html>

⁴ “Law of Conservation of Energy” and “Law of Conservation of Matter,” *Cartage.org.lb* website.

nothingness, but returns to its source, the Nameless One, the Creative Energy (which must then, to my way of thinking, also be intelligent, conscious and aware).

My epiphany on that Arizona lake was one of many experiences that have left me convinced there *is* a Divinity, a Nameless One, a conscious, creative energy more mysterious, more powerful, and far more complex than humans understand.

Consider for a moment, the incredible imagination evidenced by human beings down the ages—the Egyptians who imagined pyramids and sarcophagi and an elaborate afterlife; the Greeks with their philosophy and math, “music of the spheres,” and architecture built according to the Golden Ratio; the detailed and astonishing Zoroastrian explanation for Good and Evil; the Australian Aborigines and their amazing knowledge gained through Dream Time; the cultures and myths of Chinese, Hindu, Eskimo, the accomplishments of modern science . . .

Consider the human imagination, and then consider the imagination of whatever imagined humans.