

**Message  
Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
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**Psalms for Our Times  
By Donne Hayden**

Even those of us who **want** to believe (and mostly do believe) in a loving God have trouble sometimes accepting that the Creator of the Universe would bother to pay attention to such insignificant creatures as we humans. Some of us who struggle with faith—whether to have it or not—are more comfortable with a god inclined to flick us aside like a bothersome insect than one who seeks a relationship with us. Our struggle is complicated by the emphasis on what religious scholar Huston Smith (perhaps best known as author of *The World's Religions*) calls the “scientific worldview,” which, he says, “has no place for deity and is uncompromisingly secular.”<sup>1</sup> Smith contends that

*we now see clearly where secularism went wrong. It equated two things, absence-of-evidence and evidence-of-absence, which, once one stops to think about it, are very different. The fact that science cannot get its hands on anything except nature is no proof that nature (alternatively matter) is all that exists. Moreover, it is self-evident that other things do exist. . . . No one has seen a thought. No one has ever seen a feeling. Yet our thoughts and feelings are where we primarily live our lives.<sup>2</sup>*

We struggle to believe, however, that the Creator-of-All-There-Is can have any interest in us puny humans. At the same time, human experience is filled with accounts of encounters with a *personal* God, a God who seeks relationship with us. As Evelyn Underhill says in her Introduction to the great medieval mystical classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, “the ultimate reality which the mystic seeks to experience is finally beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), page xv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, page xvi.

the grasp of the intellect.”<sup>3</sup> So perhaps the language of science and secular culture is simply not the best language to use in matters of faith—all the best expressions of faith occur in poetry and metaphor, which permit the mystery and ambiguity that characterizes spirituality. (In fact, I believe one reason the Bible retains its power is that it is so ambiguous.)

Among the world’s major religions, Judaism was the first to seek and recognize a personal relationship with the deity, and the entire Old Testament is the story of that relationship, how it began, how it developed, and how it continues. Several thousand years ago in the Middle East, a small, insignificant tribe of people struggled for existence. This tribe, known as the Hebrews, was constantly threatened by greater, more powerful tribes around them. Eventually, they managed to escape en masse from the control of the Egyptian pharaoh who had enslaved them. Leaving Egypt, the Hebrews lived a nomadic, wandering existence for a while (“40 years” in their stories). When the tribe finally settled in an area between the Mediterranean and the Dead Seas, they became known as “Israelites” and the land they occupied, “Israel.” The significance of this name is lost in our familiarity with it; in Hebrew, “*Yisrael*” means “one who struggles with God.”

Their story of how the Israelites received that name occurs in Genesis, the first book of their collected history/literature/poetry which they call the *Tanakh* and we call the Old Testament. What is striking, of course, is the fact that they embraced the name and have kept it through the centuries. The story as it is told in Genesis, Chapters 27-32\* (see below) is an example of the way metaphor works to speak of things with which

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<sup>3</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Introduction. TEAMS Middle English Texts website, Robbins Library, University of Rochester, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/clunintr.htm>

science is not concerned, such as our struggles with faith. This story of Jacob, who wrestled with God and became *identified* as one who did so, has great metaphorical power. Jacob/Israel “struggled with God,” and in various ways, we—inheritors of the Judaic tradition—still struggle with God.

Another way to think of this is through “process theology,” a relatively recent approach that re-defines reality and divinity as *events* rather than solid, concrete entities so that we can talk about “the *experience of the sacred*” rather than about “the existence of a divine being.”<sup>4</sup> This concept takes us back once more to the possibility of a deeply personal relationship with God, though a much different image of God than the one in the Old Testament. Process theology rejects much of what is taught in traditional Christianity, such as the divinity of Jesus, but it embraces the possibility of an intensely personal relationship between God, who is not unchangeable, but constantly changing, and the Creation, which is also always changing. Creation, including human beings, obeys certain physical laws that do not change, such as the laws of conservation of energy and matter, but process theology acknowledges free will in creation, particularly in conscious creatures like humans. Through our free will, we constantly choose, and our choices have ramifications, even for God, who is an *event*, or rather, a constant series of events, as are we all. Because God is constant creative change, and we are part of that, our actions affect God, who constantly interacts with us and with all Creation. Thus, this “new development” in theology actually takes us back to the intensely personal relationship with God that the established by Judaic tradition thousands of years ago. Jacob’s wrestling with God is not so far from our own relationship with the Divine.

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<sup>4</sup> C. Robert Mesle, “A Friend’s Love: Why Process Theology Matters” (1987).

It would be a mistake to take this story literally, and as religious scholar Marcus Borg says, an insult to the people of earlier times to assume they were incapable of thinking in and using metaphor. The ancient Israelites understood the “struggle with God” as something more than a literal, physical wrestling match with a supreme being. The struggle to have faith in the face of suffering, to find goodness in a world often controlled by evil people, the struggle to trust in the existence of God—this is the struggle we find expressed throughout the writings of the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms, which depict a wide range of personal encounters with God. The word “psalm” comes from the Greek and refers to songs sung to the accompaniment of a harp. According to Australian theologian, Dr. John Thornhill:

The psalms humbly recognize that opposition to God’s designs comes also from Israel’s own sinfulness. It has been pointed out that there is no parallel in the world’s literature to the Old Testament’s acknowledgment of the nation’s sinfulness and failure. Through its backsliding and its struggle to live in fidelity, Israel came to a profound knowledge of God’s mercy and forgiveness, frequently echoed in the confession of the psalms. . .

For instance, these lines from Psalm 32:

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgression to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

And these lines from Psalm 51:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy . . . For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

And from Psalm 103, “The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy ... As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our sins.”

A Philadelphia Quaker, T.H.S. Wallace, sees cadences of the Psalms in George Fox’s *Journal*. He has collected and formatted as psalms certain sections from the *Journal*; for instance, here is QuakerPsalm 2 from Wallace’s book.

*I saw it was fallen men and women  
Who get up into Scriptures and find fault,  
Who cry out against Cain, Esau, and Judas,  
And other wicked men of former times,  
But do not see the nature of Cain, of  
Esau, of Judas in themselves. These say  
It is they, they, they, that were bad people.  
But when we come, by the Light and Spirit  
Of Truth, to see into ourselves, then we  
Come to say, “I, I, I myself have  
Been Ishmael, Esau! I have closed my eyes,  
Stopped my ears, hardened my heart! I was  
Dull of hearing. I hated the Light. I rebelled  
Against it. I quenched the Spirit  
And vexed and grieved it. I walked spitefully  
Against the grace of God, turn it  
into wantonness. I resisted the Holy Spirit.  
I got the form of Godliness, but turned  
Against the power. I, the ravening wolf,  
The well without water, tree without fruit.  
It is I, Lord, who have done these things.*

Here is a more contemporary psalm from Old Testament professor Walter Brueggeman titled “Not the God we would have chosen”:

*We would as soon you were stable and reliable.  
We would as soon you were predictable  
and always the same toward us.  
We would like to take the hammer of doctrine  
and take the nails of piety  
and nail your feet to the floor  
and have you stay in one place.  
And then we find you moving,  
always surprising us,*

*always coming at us from new directions.  
 Always planting us  
 and uprooting us  
 and tearing all things down  
 and making all things new.  
 You are not the God we would have chosen  
 had we done the choosing,  
 but we are your people  
 and you have chosen us in freedom.  
 We pray for the great gift of freedom  
 that we may be free toward you  
 as you are in your world.  
 Give us that gift of freedom  
 that we may move in new places  
 in obedience and in gratitude.<sup>5</sup>*

Reconciling the Lord of “compassion and love” with a god who allows suffering is the hardest struggle in humanity’s long wrestling match with God. Someone who eloquently expresses this struggle in contemporary psalms is Leonard Cohen, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest poets, was a popular singer/songwriter in the 1960s and 70s. Cohen is a Canadian Jew who moved to a Buddhist monastery and became an ordained Buddhist monk. In the following Psalms (now sometimes included in traditional Jewish Passover Seder rituals), Cohen gives us glimpses into his own struggles with God:

*I stopped to listen, but he did not come. I began again with a sense of loss. As this sense deepened I heard him again. I stopped stopping and I stopped starting, and I allowed myself to be crushed by ignorance. This was a strategy, and didn't work at all. Much time, years were wasted in such a minor mode. I bargain now. I offer buttons for his love. I beg for mercy. Slowly he yields. Haltingly he moves toward his throne. Reluctantly the angels grant to one another permission to sing. In a transition so delicate it cannot be marked, the court is established on beams of golden symmetry, and once again I am a singer in the lower choirs, born fifty years ago to raise my voice this high, and no higher.*

*Sit down, master, on this rude chair of praises, and rule my nervous heart with your great decrees of freedom...In utter defeat I came to you and you received me with*

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), page 87.

*a sweetness I had not dared to remember. Tonight I come to you again, soiled by strategies and trapped in the loneliness of my tiny domain. Establish your law in this walled place...*

*Holy is your name, holy is your work, holy are the days that return to you. Holy are the years that you uncover. Holy are the hands that are raised to you, and the weeping that is wept to you. Holy is the fire between your will and ours, in which we are refined. Holy is that which is unredeemed, covered with your patience. Holy are the souls lost in your unnamings. Holy, and shining with a great light, is every living thing, established in this world and covered with time, until your name is praised forever.<sup>6</sup>*

Language like this touches us at the heart; we are moved at a deeper level than intellect, the level where meaning exists—not information, not facts, but *meaning*. In his poetry, Cohen uses the words “Love” and “God” interchangeably, and he does it to powerful effect in this poem titled “The Faith.”<sup>7</sup>

*The sea so deep and blind  
The sun, the wild regret  
The club, the wheel, the mind,  
O love, aren't you tired yet?  
The club, the wheel, the mind  
O love, aren't you tired yet?  
The blood, the soil, the faith  
These words you can't forget  
Your vow, your holy place  
O love, aren't you tired yet?  
The blood, the soil, the faith  
O love, aren't you tired yet?  
A cross on every hill  
A star, a minaret  
So many graves to fill  
O love, aren't you tired yet?  
So many graves to fill  
O love, aren't you tired yet?  
The sea so deep and blind  
Where still the sun must set  
And time itself unwind*

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard Cohen, from *Book of Mercy* (1984).

<sup>7</sup> From *Book of Mercy*, as well as on a recent album titled *Dear Heather*.

*O love, aren't you tired yet?  
And time itself unwind  
O love, aren't you tired yet?*

The poem begins with a reference to the sea “so deep and blind.” We have no context yet for that image; by the end of the poem when he returns to it, we hear it in a different light. But at the beginning, he goes next to “The sun, the wild regret.” Again, we have no real context for these words, except perhaps to think of life and those things we have done that we should not have done. In the third set of images, Cohen lists elements of human existence: “The club, the wheel, the mind”— human invention in the form of club and wheel, and the human mind that devises them. Cohen names things that cause loss and pain: “The blood, the soil, the faith,” i.e., bloodshed, perhaps over the “soil” or land, and faith itself as a source of conflict and violence. Cohen mentions specifically the cross, the star and the minaret. Each symbol represents a faith: the cross of Christianity, associated with death and sacrifice; the Jewish Star of David, a symbol also of death, displacement, and genocide; and the minaret, symbol of Islam with its own violent history. Following this list of religious symbols, the poet remarks, “So many graves to fill,” and then asks again, “Love, aren’t you tired yet?”

When Cohen says, “Oh Love, aren’t you tired yet?” at this point, I hear him speaking to God—Love with a capital “L.”

Also, aren’t *we* tired of believing in a faith that results in death and destruction? Remember, the poem/song is called “The Faith.” By the last few lines of the poem when we hear repeated, “The sea so deep and blind” it now seems to be a reference to death by drowning, by violence, by accident. The poem ends with a reference to the sun setting and “time unwinding”—human history and experience must play itself out, it seems.

Again, the poet asks “Love, aren’t you tired, yet?” How much can Love take? How much can Faith take? Apparently a lot. Throughout all of our lives and all our suffering, Love accompanies us, never deserting us, illogically and unaccountably present each time we turn to seek it.