

I, Thou, and the Holy

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A few years ago I was working out in the gym when I saw someone use one of the weight machines in a way that intrigued me. Now, I find the gym to often be a place of unnecessarily confusing gadgetry, as I am mechanically ungifted. There are too many machines and buttons and levers and pulleys on most machines. Most of them are puzzles that I'll never figure out, but I saw her using one that was unfamiliar to me but looked kind of fun. It involved lifting a bunch of weight with your shoulders and squatting down on sort of an inclined ramp and then standing up again. I deduced that one's legs and back would strengthen as a result of this exercise, and who doesn't want that. New legs; new back; new you.

So after she left the machine, I picked a weight that seemed reasonable and lifted it one time. It was very easy, so I put another weight disc thing on it; a big one; a 45-pounder. That was easy too, so I added another. And that was still easy, so I added one more. You know, you want to feel the burn. Then I did a full set, and then another, and because I had a little bit left, I did one more. I finished my workout and continued on with my day feeling strong and confident. I had mastered a new machine, and I had taught that thing a lesson.

The next morning, when I could barely move; when I could hardly put my shoes on; when I could "feel the burn" whilst simply standing in line at the coffee shop; when the thought of lifting one of my little kids into my arms created an inner snort of derision from my back, my legs, even my shoulders which I was unaware had really been exercised; when Advil worked like a placebo and even Aleve had the effect of baby aspirin, I realized that maybe I had bitten off a bit more than I should have chewed. Maybe I should started with less weight, lifted less often, and sought not the "burn" but simply the motion and the light resistance of a new exercise. Maybe the new self I sought should come slowly from the existing self, as trying to create a new me too quickly would nearly incapacitate me.

I think part of my ambition was rooted in seeing someone use the machine in a seemingly effortless way; in that way that someone who understands computers can make that stuff seem easy; or in the way that a good cook can just whip things up and make it look like everyone else can. She made the machine seem like something that would more or less take care of itself; you just had to jump on and go through the motions. Which, technically, one could do. But there'd be a price to pay. And it was a sore price indeed.

The Cherokee might call me a rabbit. In their stories there is a recurring character of this Rabbit who sees other animals doing things that she wants to do, and tries to do, and then gets in trouble for doing. In my favorite Rabbit story, Rabbit is talking to Otter, who is talking about how he's hungry and is going to eat a duck. The Rabbit asks him how he catches a duck, so Otter swims under the surface to where the ducks are hanging out and grabs one from below and eats it.

Rabbit says, "I can do that, or something even better." She makes a lasso out of some weeds and swims for a while under the water to where the ducks are, popping up several times to catch her

breath along the way. When she finally gets close to a duck, she lassos the animal but the duck flies away, taking Rabbit with her high into the air. Rabbit loses her grip on the lasso and falls into the hollow of a tall dead tree on the edge of the lake. There's no hole at the bottom of the tree, so Rabbit is stuck there for a long time while Otter makes a hole so that Rabbit can escape. In the meantime, Rabbit gets very, very hungry and starts eating her own fur, which is why the Cherokee tell us that rabbits sometimes eat their fur.

But what the Cherokee are really telling us is, "You do you." If you're a rabbit, don't try to be an otter. If you're an otter, don't try to be another animal. Be yourself, lest you get stuck, lonely, in the hollow of a tree with no way out. There are many reasons to try and be other people; many lures of other selves that tempt us to be something we're not, but Cherokee wisdom is that if you're a rabbit, be a good rabbit, because the only kind of otter you'll ever be is a bad one.

This tendency to try and be something we're not, or do things we really can't do, is alive in the world as many try to figure out how to respond to the rise of fascism in America. Sometimes we are drawn to the heroic and selfless stories of those seeming to do everything under the sun to create a new kind of world, aware that our lives and talents just don't allow for that kind of activism. We see others in action in ways that we can't mimic, and we can feel guilty or even ashamed because we're not them, doing what they can do.

Lost in that shame however, is the wisdom that we're not necessarily supposed to do what they're doing; we're supposed to do what we can do. If that's write letters instead of travel to marches; if that's make phone calls instead of organize boycotts; if that's send a note to a Muslim friend instead of attending a rally at a mosque; that's us being us. That's us doing what we can do. Not at expense of what others can do; not in competition with what others can do; in fact, what's best is each doing what each can do while grateful that others can do other things.

The diversity of our gifts, if fully appreciated, can result in a diverse array of resistance to what is harming people in this country. But if we try to be monolithic in the gifts afforded to us by a Creation that is anything but monolithic, we will narrow the path to greater freedom, more equality, and loving kindness to only the one chosen by whoever has the loudest bullhorn. Many will be left unmoved and unmoving, off to the side; their power and voice unharnessed and perhaps silenced in the despair of guilt or shame.

The choice is often one of shame or gratitude. When we see others doing something we wish we could do, we can be grateful that they can do it, or admire their talents, or encourage them with a compliment and a kind word. Or we can be ashamed of our lacking in their area of excellence, and that shame will usually keep us quiet, or ring our appreciation with a certain sadness that extends into the space in between us and the other person. The gratitude does too; whatever we bring within ourselves into our relationships with others enters that space between the two of us and becomes part of that new entity formed by two people in relationship.

Martin Buber, a great Jewish philosopher of the 20th century, called that space between two people sacred. He developed this philosophy of "I and thou" living as opposed to "I and it" living. In an "I and it" world, the other is an object from which we are separate. In an "I and thou" world, the other is not really an "other," but an entity formed in relationship with the self.

Relationality is everything in Buber's thought, as it is in modern Unitarian Universalism, which is partly why he's popular in our faith. Before we are a rational faith, or an affective faith; before we are a free faith or a pluralistic faith; before we are a faith of unity or a faith universality, we are a faith of covenant, which is to say we are a faith of relationship. What we do is never as important as how we do it, for it's in the relationships that we build with one another, with the stranger, with the world, and with the God of our hearts that we come to live lives of meaning and beauty. Or another way of saying it is that those lives of meaning and beauty are found in the "I and thou," of life, not the "I and it."

And for Buber, what turned something from an "it" into a "thou" was awareness. Being aware of one's connection to something changes it from an object to a partner in a sacred relationship. This extends beyond the human relationship; noticing the beauty of a tree, feeling the firmness of the soil, welcoming the cleansing rain, warming one's hands at a fire; these are all ways of turning an object into a "thou," which creates a relationship. This is why Buber is popular in modern mysticism; space can become alive in his philosophies, for if that space is treated with reverence and gratitude, it becomes holy. For him, such a space is the space in which God lives. The Holy is in that space between "I and thou;" not between "I and it," but in that space between "I and thou," and what creates that space; what changes it from "I and it," to "I and thou" is the intention that we bring to it. We create the space in which God lives.

That's why he's heretical in some circles, which is another thing we like about him. But if you think of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, a small section of which is printed on the cover of the Order of Worship this week, you can see the space in between the finger of God and finger of Adam. Life has just been created, turning dust into a person; turning an "it" into a "thou." And that's what happens every day in an "I and thou" world. It's just that both fingers are human, and God comes into the space that is made holy by the intention that people bring to its creation.

And when the other is turned from an object into something more, so, too is the self. The self is formed in relationship with others, with the world, with the Holy, and the intention that we bring into all of those relationships ends up creating a good bit of who we are. And so if what we bring is shame, we become more shame-filled selves. But if what bring is gratitude, we become more grateful. If what we bring is hope, we become more hopeful. Yes, if we bring anger and judgment, we become more of those qualities, but if we bring forgiveness, and joy, and resilience, and peace, we create those kinds selves too.

These wonderful qualities reflect in us the sacred space that we are building in the "I and thou's" of life. But if the happy, mystical part is true; that we create the space in which Holy dwells, and that space is always relational, then so, too must the shadow side be true. We also create the space where the Holy is not present, and it's a space of objects, and negativity, and mean-spiritedness. And not only does that hurt the other and absent the Holy, but it turns us into beings that only more greatly reflect that which ought not to be.

It's easy to reflect that in today's world, but we can be guided by the core of our theology in which lay two great beliefs: we are one, and we are loved. Beyond everything that would divide us, we are one people in creation, and regardless of what we've ever done or said, we are loved. That love will never leave us and that essential unity will never discard us. There is an original,

universal love flowing through everybody in every space of all time that never abandons us, and we are elementally interconnected with everything that has even been such we are one with life. These are beliefs of our faith: that we are one, and we are loved; the former proclaiming that in all our relations, we are “I and thou,” and the latter proclaiming that the root of that “I and thou” world is one of love. It’s the same love with which we created along with everyone else. And it’s the same unity in which all souls can find beloved company.

It is the holy center, the core, the foundation of the self, upon which everything, good and bad, is built. Our good news for the world is to proclaim to each open heart that you are fundamentally built upon a rock of love. And you are a part of a loving creation in which meaning is found through holy relationships. And that meaning can be built in goodness and truth; in kindness and fairness; in compassion and generosity; with deep, abiding, marvelous gratitude for diversity. And as we build that kind of meaning together, we also make more luminescent those qualities within ourselves, and they become beacons for others to see how life can be rooted in love and unity.

The self starts with original love and original unity, and then we build onto the self lives that reflect the kinds of relationships we create, and those relationships create the world. And with so much work to do these days, perhaps it’s best to remember, every day, in the quietude of prayer, before the playfulness of kids, in the embrace of beautiful music, standing within the mystery of nature, that you are loved; not yet as a message for the world; but first that you are loved. I mean you. You, as a child of creation. You, whoever you are. You, receiving these words. You are loved. You always have been and you always will be. And you are one with life. You always have been and you always will be.

And as a rabbit, you’ll always be a rabbit, but you’re a rabbit built off of love and connected forever in unity. And the otters are the same. And the well-sculpted weight lifters, and those of us less adept at that talent. It’s sometimes easier to offer the theological proclamation that all are loved than to accept it as a spiritual, personal, truth. We’re often better at public theology than we are more personal spirituality, but the more we move forward assured of the love and unity in which we are held, the more we’ll be able to hold a world that is deeply hurting. We’ll be stronger. We’ll have more spiritual muscle of faith and endurance to withstand setbacks and keep reaching out to people. And with this strength, be we rabbits or otters, be we leader of the march of followers in the pack, be we the speakers, the singers, the writers, the artists, or the strategists, we’ll feel held in what we do. We’ll be in for the long haul, through victories and setbacks. And we’ll have the foundation of love and unity, and the sacred, expanding sense of relationship with more and more of life, to turn more shadows into more light.

May it be so, and Amen.