

## Divine Sparks

A friend of mine has an e-mail correspondence with her grandfather. One day she received this letter: "My ulcerated tooth keeps me awake. It hurts like hell, and I will have to go to the hospital to have it pulled or I'd bleed to death from all the blood thinners in me.

"But I can't leave Mother. She falls and forgets her ointments and tranquilizers; her ankles swell, and she can't fit into her shoes anymore.

"I can hardly go a step without my silly walker. I hate not getting out, but I fell in the bathroom, and our aide could hardly lift me. I thought my back was broken, will be next time. Prostate, bad; heart almost given out.

"I have made my peace because I am just plain done for and have no doubt the end will come any day with my release.

"You tell me you enjoy your bird feeder. I don't see why you want to spend good money on grain for birds. You say you have a hundred sparrows; I'd buy poison and get rid of their noise and disease."

Signed, Grandfather

People go through times like this. Death and darkness can strip away all the pleasant elements of life that seem so important, leaving us with, what?

I recall my father dying. His robust 42-year-old body had wasted away. He was too weak even to sit himself up in bed. To help him drink a glass of juice in the morning, I would raise him to a sitting position, then place myself behind him, bracing his back with my shoulder. Then I'd walk to school, trying to make sense of what was happening.

When aging takes away health, illness takes away loved ones, and life takes a painful turn, you can find yourself as Dante recalls:

...astray in a dark wood  
where the straight road had been lost sight of.  
How hard it is to say what it was like  
in the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense and gnarled  
the very thought of it renews my panic.  
It is bitter almost as death itself is bitter...  
How I got into it I cannot clearly say  
for I was moving like a sleepwalker...

What then? Individuals, communities, nations can be lost, which means it's time to go back to original sources.

Not long after that first e-mail my friend received this one: “Thanks for your visit. Nice of you to bring the bird feeder, but a waste of your money for that big sack of seeds since we won’t be living more than a few weeks longer.

“We can see them from where we sit, though, big ones and little ones, but you know when I farmed I used to hunt, and we had many a meal from pigeons and quail and pheasant, but these little ones won’t be good for anything. Mother likes the red ones, though, the cardinals.

“My bad knee aches, and I can hardly hear. Mother says she is hoarse from yelling, but I know it’s too late for a hearing aid. My stomach troubles me. I have a sour mouth, but with my heart, it is no use to go to a doctor. Mother is the same.”

Sincerely, Your Grandfather

When life strips away good health and comfort, I go back to original sources. I ask, Who am I? Where did I come from? What really matters?

My father’s last Christmas morning, I helped him down the stairs. He sat gaunt in an easy chair, opened a few gifts, watched us open ours. He grew exhausted from sitting, and I helped him back up the stairs to his bed.

Two weeks later, he slipped into a coma, and died. I felt thrown and asked, Who am I? Where did I come from? As the sun drifted low and cold in the sky, I looked to my original sources.

Regarding one source: Jewish mystics say that at creation a divine light burst and its sparks fell into the world. Now every thing, every animal, every person in the world is filled with these divine sparks. The Roman Catholic, Hildegard of Bingen had the same thought as she said, “We are all sparks of the Divine flame.”

Another source: physicists theorize that 12 to 14 thousand million years ago, the universe was infinitesimally small, infinitely hot, and infinitely dense -- a singularity. It then expanded, a tiny balloon expanding to become the vast cosmos and its stars and planet, and you and me. Indeed, each particle and person in the world is made of stardust from the big bang.

Can you see around you the sparks that showered into creation, or the stardust that traveled thousands of millions of miles over thousands of millions of years to be here now? Though you sit as a separate human being, can the stardust, the sparks within you remember when stardust and sparks clung together in infinite union before bursting forth?

The grandfather writes: “The birds are eating and quarrelling. I watch them and sometimes laugh. All shapes and sizes come out of the woods, but we don’t know what they are. Mother hopes you can send us a book that tells about birds. There is one folks call snowbirds -- they eat on the ground. We had our aide sprinkle some extra seed there,

but, say, they eat a lot. I sent her into town to buy some more seed; she had to go anyway.”

Yours truly, Granddad

Religious practice helps people see the divine sparks and sense the stardust all around. And with seeing the sparks and sensing the stardust comes a harkening back to that time of original oneness.

When people tell the story of creation, maybe the divine sparks within, the stardust within, remember the oneness, the union: when everything bonded in a mass so tight, so infinitely dense that it defied natural laws, when the divine light shone with the sparks that would compose the world. I think creation stories express a yearning memory of oneness.

Remembering the oneness, seeing the sparks all around me hints of union possible now. I think people desire this union and have a deep longing for love, to love and be loved, to move closer to the spirit of love, the source of love. Maybe the divine sparks want to reunite; the stardust wants infinite bonding. Something inside human beings wants love.

But other forces pull away from love. One pull away: repression. Love at times brings pain because people have limits in what we can give each other. The person from whom I want love is busy, or distant, or dies. To avoid further pain, as a natural human response, I repress my desire for love and attempt to live in self-separate isolation. Repressed, the desire for love goes underground, but resurfaces as a vague discontent. The desire, the sparks, the stardust say, “We still long for love. We still yearn to reunite.”

A second process, more insidious than repression, pulls people away from union. I’ll call it, addiction. While repression stifles desire, addiction attaches that desire for infinite union to finite objects -- behaviors, substances, ideas, or people, that become obsessions. People usually associate addiction with drugs or alcohol. I give it a broader scope, to describe the process of attaching the desire for infinite union to something finite. That finite object religion would call an idol: this drink, this person, this ideology. Addiction wastes one’s desiring energy on something finite and small and safe, as if that would bring salvation. I think true salvific vehicles are bigger, wilder, riskier: divine sparks, stardust, the universe, the woods.

After my father died, that April I went hiking for a week. I still looked to my sources with questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where can I find peace now? So I left my family and Manhasset, NY, to go back as close as I could to one source, to the woods. During my hike I passed through three consecutive days of rain. On the first day, I felt annoyed. On the second, I felt depressed. On the third day I realized that my life had shattered, and the clouds poured relentlessly, and I surrendered and let the tears flow down my face with the rain. And the trail beckoned me onward as if saying, this is the

place to be shattered, and down this path you'll find a source where the sparks will reunite.

The grandfather wrote: "I almost called you on the phone, but it costs so much, thought I'd better write. Say, the funniest thing is happening, we have so many birds and they quarrel and get so excited at their feed, you know, it's really something to watch, and two or three flew and crashed into our window, and bang, knocked themselves silly. After a while they came to on the ground and flew away.

"We felt awful and didn't know what to do, but the other day a lady from our church came out to call, and a bird knocked itself out while she sat, and she went out and brought it in her hands right in the house, and it looked dead. It was brown, didn't know what it was, and I touched it gently, and it came to life right there in her hands, and she took it outside, and it flew.

"She says they think the window is the sky. She feeds birds too, but not as many, and she hangs strips of aluminum foil in the window, so we'll try that. She raved about our birds."

Yours, Granddaddy

When pain and death strip away familiar comforts, show the failure of addictions, the hollowness of idols, one can open oneself, like a bird unfurling its wings, and let the desiring for union with the infinite soar. One asks, Who am I? Where did I come from? What is this world? Then one is open to one's self, one's source, and the world, and so open, one can reunite.

On my hike I felt shattered, but the rain passed, and that night the stars reappeared, and fireflies danced in the trees, like divine sparks. And I felt broken, but the stars and sparks looked like some long lost brothers and sisters beckoning me to re-union.

The grandfather wrote: "Say, that bird book is good. I study it everyday and enjoy our birds. Some of them I can identify -- the Latin words I just skip over. Bet you'd never guess the sparrows we've got here: House Sparrows, Fox Sparrows, Song Sparrows, Vesper, Pine Woods, and Tree, Chipping, and White Throat, and White Crowned Sparrows. We have six Cardinals, three pairs, they come early morning and night. Juncos, maybe twenty-five, what I used to call snowbirds, quarrelling on the ground, with their yellow beaks and white tail bars. I have Flickers, and Red-Bellied, and Red-Headed Woodpeckers. And you would laugh to see the Nuthatches walking on tree trunks right-side up, up-side down, every which way."

Love, Your Grandfather

Ideally, religion leans people away from addictions and back to their source. It disciplines people to open to union with the infinite. As a religious practice I walked for a week in the woods. The grandfather noticed the birds and stopped to watch.

In their religious practice Yemenite Jews sit cross-legged on the floor wrapped in prayer shawls, swaying backwards and forwards as they read the Torah. A Muslim fasts from sun up to sun down through the month of Ramadan and prays five times a day, prostrating toward Mecca. A Swami sits in his tiny house on the bank of the Ganges at the foot of the Himalayas. He does not speak today. For five years in all but three days a year, he has lived in devotional silence. A Christian receives communion, taking into his or her body a morsel of God. Zen monks in Kyoto wake at 3:00am to spend the day cross-legged and immobile as they seek to plumb the depths of their being.

Today Unitarian Universalists come together for worship and find others who support their values of freedom, human worth, and love. And with the support of their communities they live their lives, work, care for their families, and seek meaning and peace. We human beings have so many ways to open and notice the sparks.

Sometimes, in their spiritual practice, people allow their lives to be shattered, willingly, that the idols might fall, that they might be thrown back to original sources, back to union and love and God. Sometimes nature shatters people with illness, death, and loss, and the addictions fail, the idols fall, and people take a walk in the woods in the rain and surrender and open to something infinite, to grace, to a mystery, and find union, and love.

My friend's grandfather writes: "It's sure a surprise how well Mother is doing. She can fit into her shoes again. I had my tooth pulled, and it didn't bleed at all. I'm even walking around better, with only a cane. Mother looks at me and says I'm off my walker.

"Now that it's warm and the windows are open, we hear the birds singing all day. I wonder, how did my hearing improve? I am reading up on bird habits. Did you know some males have three wives? Some migrate, and some don't. I am going to keep feeding them all spring and summer; you can see they expect it. I'll need thistle seed for Goldfinch and Pine Siskin next winter. Some folks are coming to see us from church, some bird watchers. They have birds in town, but nothing like this."

Love, Papa

And the divine sparks in the grandfather leap to see the birds and their sparks as they fly across the thousands of light years to greet, like long lost brothers and sisters, and rejoice.

The Rev. Kenneth Reeves

The story of the grandfather was adapted from a poem, "Letters From a Father," by Mona VanDuyn.