

## A Letter From God

Reading:

“I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,  
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that whereso'er I go  
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.”

-- Walt Whitman

Sermon:

I found this letter dropt in the street. It reads:

Hi everyone. How's everything going? Of course, I already know, but I like to ask. I care about you and want to listen.

For me, I am going through changes, as always. You might remember some of my adaptations. You first noticed me when you were just beginning to be people, half a million years ago or so. It seems like just yesterday I watched you stand up straight and say your first words. When you began to speak, you became aware of yourselves, and, with self-awareness, you found yourselves separate from the earth and the water and the animals. Lonesome then for a dimly remembered preconscious oneness, you began to think of me.

You told stories of a time when all was a formless oneness; how all was water -- the sea -  
- and how there then emerged out of the oneness: earth, trees, animals; each separate,  
distinct; and how you were one of the many distinct things. To reconnect back with  
water, earth, trees, and animals, you remembered in stories when all was one, and  
thought of me as the creator.

In your hunter-gatherer clans, you tried not only to reunite with the oneness, but to make sense of the world around you. For you then I was a spirit animating nature, like the god of the south wind. I could also be distinct from the south wind, but be the god who blew the wind. I gave animals supernatural powers. Within a bird I made the snow. And I could be a spirit of an ancestor, doing good or mischief. Indeed, I was often the cause of calamity. I was a petulant storm god who would fly into a rage if someone made a noise while cicadas were singing.

Back then village shamans communicated with me via trances, fasting, and prayer. They stepped out of their self-separateness, relinquished control, took a risk and knocked on the door of the infinite to find the mystery of me.

When you formed into larger groups, I empowered the chiefs that ruled you. Chiefs that succeeded in war and peace, were favored by me. Less favored chiefs were replaced. I was good news, bad news for the chiefs.

Then you formed states, and there were hundreds of me, two thousand in ancient Mesopotamia alone. I had titles like: head chef, brickmaker, brewer, gardener, steward, secretary, inspector of canals, and hairdresser. I was a god for Aztec thieves. For ancient Egypt, versions of me oversaw your body's organs: the god of the liver, the god of the lungs, the god of the stomach, and the god of the intestines, and, you can guess, that intestine god bore lots of guts jokes. As the great goddess I was warm and soft as a mother. As Demeter I walked the earth urging crops to grow. As Dionysus I drank wine; as Zeus I philandered. I was human in character, but with supernatural powers, intervening everywhere and involved in everything. I could be cunning, ferocious, and loving and compassionate. I am large. I am infinite.

As your communities grew into hundreds of thousands I helped create law and order. In Mesopotamia I laid down laws against what would hurt people, right down to an injunction against urinating in streams, these laws enforced by demon gods. I was cosmic lawmaker, judge, jury, prosecutor, and punisher. And you obeyed me and worshipped me to gain rewards and avoid punishments.

In time I began to coalesce into one divinity. For ancient Babylon I was Marduk. In Egypt as the god Amun I won some battles and became preeminent. In Canaan I was El, who evolved with the Hebrews into Yahweh. I would be one people's ally against another people and their god. We gods would wage gory battles that would make slasher movies look like afternoon tea. I would slay and slaughter enemy gods as well as despised people. I allowed myself to be wielded as an ultimate weapon, as a blessing for sadistic cruelty. Indeed, after the Hebrews had been captured by Babylon, I was one vengeful deity. Even today, when people suffer defeat, they invoke me with a sword in my hand.

But I shudder to think of the killing done in my name. It is like having a job you know is unethical, but have trouble quitting. Those warriors gave me lots of power, and power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. I had absolute power. I was dangerous.

So I began to make my enemies into my friends. It was difficult, but I am god. When tolerance toward a neighbor did people good, I helped them by making peace with the neighbor god. And while once I invited Israel to plunder the enemy Moabites, in the Book of Ruth I helped welcome Ruth the Moabite into a loving Hebrew community. In the Book of Ezekiel I helped make Assyria suffer "as its wickedness deserves." But later in the Book of Jonah I took compassion for the Assyrians. In your own lives, when you have moved from revenge and hatred, to a softening and an opening and vulnerability and compassion, your tears well up, and I am there. I have done the same, and I love you when you make peace as I have made. And then everyone benefits.

In history I moved from caring for one nation, such as Israel, to caring for all nations. I offered Noah the rainbow after the flood, as a sign of “an everlasting covenant between God and every living creature.”

To take this love a step further, I took a new form, became human, to see how it feels to have a body and to hurt. I let myself be punished to atone for the violence in my name and to show people that I was on their side in their pain, that I did not want to hurt but to love. I wanted people to relax around me again. I wanted to show people that I had less power, more love.

Some people understood, and what a relief. Indeed, it did you good to love others. The links you had with each other were widening to span city-states and across nations. You benefited more from trade than war, and I helped by providing loving attitudes. I told you that tolerance brings more tolerance, and that with tolerance everyone can relax and trust.

But some kept seeing me as supporting cruelty by sending people to hell. What a notion: that the ultimate source of meaning and life would create a torture chamber for people who did not believe in an ultimate source of meaning and life who tortured people. And they enlisted me into inquisitions and crusades, and I went along.

I have evolved toward love, and have regressed, and have evolved again. I have tended toward love, and the expansion of the range of who is to be loved. When I declared, thou shalt not kill, I meant, thou shalt not kill one of us, whomever the “us” group was at the time. But with each passing century, the “us” group grows.

Some 400 years ago I helped the Unitarians in a little backwater country, Transylvania, write the world’s first edict of religious tolerance. Now it is common for countries to allow differing faiths to co-exist. I told the Universalists, please, tell the people I love you all, and warnings of hell and eternal of punishment have quieted. And while war still rages, the world has fewer wars than ever before. In primal days warfare raged so often, a third of all deaths occurred by violence. Today fewer than one ten thousands of people die as a result of war. Each death grieves me, but so many more of you live in peace.

To continue to bring peace, and to bring myself yet closer to people I am reminding some of you of when I was the Goddess. Taking the form of a man and letting myself be punished for my violence did not do enough to help people see me as pacific and loving, and still left the feminine under-represented by the divine, so the beard is off, the hips on.

I remind people of when I was feminine, nurturing and warm 10,000 years ago, and they celebrate my loving quality. Women in particular sense their feminine spirit valued and feel belonging and importance.

In truth, I have qualities you call masculine and others you call feminine, and I’m a genderless transcendent spirit, but if being female brings women, or anyone, closer to me, I’ll be female.

I'll take whatever form attracts you to what is ultimately meaningful and liberating in your lives. When you move toward that source, your hearts are filled, your needs met. You are whole and at peace. You know you are loved. You know you belong.

I like taking the form of a woman, but I am also breaking out of forms all together. I am breaking out of being a being. I'm more mysterious than the picture of me on the Sistine Chapel or even than the goddess figurines, though I don't mind looking that good.

I told the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, that I'm not a being, that I can't be defined, but that I can be found in connection. With my grace people connect. They say, "you," to each other with their whole beings. In that moment they do not teach each other, use each other, change each other, impress each other, earn money from each other, compete with each other. They do nothing with each other except encounter each other. Their two beings make contact and find a moment of peace and meaning that makes them pause in awe. I am there, serving a divine function: providing grace that brings people together.

I am also beginning to symbolize the oneness and interdependence of life. You're beginning to see the world as an interdependent web of connections, and that along these connections life flows. From all your infinite relations, from the water, the trees, the animals, the air, each other, you receive life. It comes through you, like the air you breathe, and you pass it on. Your connections to these relations of yours are such a source of life that you find me in them, and rightfully so. I am the source because I connect you to all, and through these connections you come alive and know that you belong in this infinitely connected cosmos.

When you lived together in clans, your relations were indeed your blood relations, and I helped you link with them. When you lived in larger groups, and then city-states, I held your communities together. Entire nations saw me as unifying, and now versions of me span nations. My next job, my next adaptation, involves including all people, and all of life, into one whole in which what benefits one benefits all. It's a big leap for me, but then, I am infinite, and in each new era people have helped by adjusting to the new me that has helped them survive and thrive.

My scope involves the whole world, but I also see you. I am within each of you as a vitalizing spirit, as a healer and support, as that which is most trustworthy, as your links to everything. All you have to do is open to me, and you'll realize I'm there.

I want closeness with you, but not to be idolized. How do I make myself a warm, personal, inviting form without being limited by that form? When people worship my form, my shell, as if that were the be-all-to-end-all, I want to say, I'm more mysterious than that.

But when I eschew forms, and a theologian like Paul Tillich says that I am "the ground of being" or humanity's "ultimate concern," people complain that I'm cool and aloof. You don't feel warmed by an abstract ground of being or ultimate concern. I care about you

and don't want to appear cool and aloof, but I don't want you stuck on a nice form and a pretty face. I want you to find the real ineffable me.

So I take on forms from the Aztec god of thieves to Noah's rainbow covenant of concern for all. Can these forms and ideas beckon you beyond them to experience the mystery? I am busy beckoning.

I have cut back on some chores, though. I used to manipulate events in the world. That was too much work and never really yielded the spiritual results I had hoped. Trying to take care of people's needs by giving them every little thing they wanted, made me into a sort of cosmic valet. I was co-dependent. Now I let the world run on its own.

Though I don't make the world right for everyone, when the world wounds, I heal. You might remember in your darkest hour beginning to see a ray of light. That was me. And furthermore, I give people strength and courage for them to heal the world. I stand as ally to individuals healing and to world healers.

And I try to bring healing and wholeness. Memories of my old violence and judgment linger, so I heal our relationship by taking new forms or offering new ideas about who I am. And new ideas about me can heal our relationship, but ideas can also hurt.

They hurt when people think they have a wrong idea about me. They then consign themselves to the bottom of a spiritual hierarchy where they imagine me punishing them. I don't want to punish; I bring widening circles of love.

Ideas also hurt my relationship with people when someone thinks they have such a good idea about me that it's better than other people's. They then place themselves on top of a spiritual hierarchy. Good ideas about me bring people closer to each other and to me. They do not create winners and losers. I love and bless everyone equally and infinitely. My cosmos is not a pyramid, but an interdependent web of equals.

A third problem with ideas about me is that they are not me. This is not really a letter from God. It's a letter from an idea about God. I could not write a letter. I could not use words. As the Hindus put it, I am the one from whom all words recoil.

Start speaking words and you create boundaries and categories in which each thing is distinct from each other. But I am about oneness, the formless ocean before the world is created, and oneness has neither boundaries nor categories and as such defies words. When I am defined by a name or an idea, that makes me just one more object in a world of objects. But I am not an object; I transcend objects.

On the other hand, the ultimate can only become actual to people through the concrete -- through words, ideas, and forms. I hope they work. They do if they bring you to know in your heart how loving I am. I remember your first words. I loved you when you started to walk. And if you knew how much I love you, you could say, yes, to me, and open to me and trust me.

And when you open to me you might sense me in moments where you have no words. In the cool night air, I am whispering to you -- in the infinitude of stars; in the warmth that comes over you in the presence of one you love; in the surprise, a ha!, of a new insight; in your sense of well-being and peace; in your healing and slow wholeness. You might sense me in the mysterious coming together of your church community. You might hear me in the silence, see me in the darkness, taste me on your palate as you breathe. You might see me in another's face and know me when you love another person. You might see me in your own face in the glass.

You might sense my face turned toward you. My face always turns toward you. There I am smiling at you, curious about you. And when you are lost, you might sense my hand groping to find you. Your face will be wet with your tears, and I will find you then, and tell you, I love you.

And it is signed by God's name...

The Rev. Kenneth Reeves