



YOU NEVER KNOW

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The goal of mystical consciousness is to fully receive the unique essence of another through deep understanding and empathy. Yet how often in life are we simply unable to understand one another? Receiving each other becomes next to impossible because of distance, strangeness, hurry, deafness, carelessness, or inevitable difference in the languages of our soul prints. Try as we might, the full depth of so many people are ultimately unknowable to us, much the same as God is ultimately unknowable to us. Are we to give up, or is there a path of receiving which is true even when we cannot fully grasp the soul print of another? Is there a way to receive what seems so unreceivable, whether human or divine?

This quandary inspired St. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval writer who did so much to define Christianity, and Moses Maimonides, perhaps the most important Jewish philosopher-mystic of the last thousand years.

Our task, both wisdom-masters assume, is-to receive God. As Platonic philosopher Plotinius said, God is the lonely one.

You don't have to read much of the Bible, or any other religious document for that matter, to realize that God has a serious soul print communication problem. Indeed, the word "levado," used to express the loneliness of Adam, Jacob, and Joseph, is also used to refer to God. God's essence-his divine soul print-remains unshared with most of humanity.

How can we redeem God from divine loneliness? For theologians like Aquinas and Maimonides and many others past and present, the very essence of God is his incommunicability. According to these medieval scholars, God is unknowable. In the language of one scholar, "If I knew him I would be him." Aquinas and Maimonides proposed an ingenious solution they called "the affirmation of not knowing"-that is, we recognize God by acknowledging that we do not know him. In the words of one of French writer Edmond Jabes' characters, "I know you, Lord, in the measure that I do not know you."

For years I thought the "affirmation of not knowing" to be a classic example of irrelevant if clever medieval sophistry. Two incidents occurred that changed my mind. The first took place at the small neighborhood grocer around the corner from my house. On a rare stormy day in Jerusalem, I made my way through the rain to the grocer to pick up some essentials for my bad-weather hibernation. My mood was about as foul as the gust of smoke that greeted me at the door. The source of the noxious fumes, I soon found out, was a swarthy-faced middle-aged man, loitering in my corner store! Shirt open to chest, large gold necklace and all, he stood there smoking his 9 AM cigar. Fanning my way through his smoke, and coughing, I mumbled to the grocer my consternation at the torrential rains that had soaked me through and through.

The man with the gold necklace turned and looked at me-I promise-with the gentlest look you could possibly imagine. All of his features suddenly appeared handsome and majestic. The gold necklace seemed regal, the smoke sweet as an incense offering. "Don't you know," he said, "it's raining today because a holy man has gone to his world."

I felt like some gate had swung open inside of me. Something in my heart went soft-I just wanted to reach out and hug him for being so beautiful. It was an epiphany moment pure and simple. Only later when I got home and read the paper did I see that one of Jerusalem's great mystics had in fact died that morning: the Rebbe of Gur, a Hassidic master and leader of a thriving community with origins in the Eastern European town of Gur, a community that had been virtually wiped out during the Holocaust. This master had slowly, painstakingly, and with endless love, passion, and daring rebuilt his community in Israel over the past forty years. The world felt so much darker without him.

If I said that I thought the man with the cigar and the gold necklace was an angel, I would be taking the easy way out. Indeed, he was not an angel but flesh and blood. And I had totally misjudged him. I thought him to be a boor- coarse and crass, involved only in his immediate needs. However, the shining beauty and Zen-like understanding on his face as he told me that a holy man had died let me know how superficial my vision had been. I had assumed I knew him, and I had not truly known him at all. I had not received him. The words of a modern spiritual singer, Shlomo Carlebach, flashed through my mind: "You Never Know You Never Know--You Never Know." The intent of the refrain is the need to acknowledge that we never really can be certain of the nature of the person standing before us. That is precisely what Aquinas was saying about the lonely God. It is true we cannot understand God. But whether we are relating to God, to an intimate, or to a near-stranger, we can get to the end of all knowing--that is, the acknowledgement that we do not know.

We know that one major soul print danger is the temptation to judge, label, categorize, dismiss, or otherwise try to put another person in a box. People in boxes are less threatening to us. Instead, we must seek to receive an other's soul print, even as we are aware that the other remains mysterious to us, ultimately unknowable, just like God. We are called to honor the soul print by gently saying to ourselves, "You Never Know You Never Know-You never know."

To Know You Don't Know

Here is the second incident that made me come to accept the truth of my not-knowing. One Friday night in Jerusalem, I was the keynote speaker at a conference hosted by the Israeli government for all the editors of Jewish newspapers in the world. I had just arrived back in Israel from a lecture in San Francisco and was exhausted. Anyone who has ever been that tired knows that it is something like being drunk. When you're drunk, you go high or you go low. That night I went high. Speaking to the editors, I first taught them a song, then lectured for awhile, drank a toast, sang another song, and then lectured and drank another toast and sang once more.

It was a truly beautiful evening and seemed like a strong and effective presentation, or so I thought. Truth is, it looked like everybody else thought so too. That is, except for one guy who sat in the third row--writing. Now I am a liberal Orthodox rabbi and I would never impose my Sabbath observance laws (which preclude writing) on anyone. Nevertheless, to write so openly despite the unspoken understanding that the Sabbath mood should be maintained, at least in the public spaces of the conference, seemed a bit strange. What really made me crazy is that I was spilling my heart out giving this lecture and he was just sitting there in the third row, writing. The chutzpah!

By the time I ended my lecture, the man had succeeded in thoroughly annoying me. It was clear he was a superficial, self-involved journalistic bureaucrat. Surely, I thought, here was a

symbol of the tepid, insipid sort of religiosity I was dedicated to overthrowing through spiritual revolution. Before I left the hail I sought him out, thinking to give him at least an oblique reprimand of sorts.

To my surprise, he greeted me with tears in his eyes. Before I had a chance to make a fool of myself, he said, "Please look at what I have written." He showed me sheet after sheet of musical notes. I cannot read a note of music and had no idea what this was about. Then, speaking English with a thick Bulgarian accent, he declared, "I have been the editor of a paper in Bulgaria for only a few months now. I got the job by chance. Since I was six years old, I have not heard a Jewish song ... until you sang tonight. Something happened as you sang. I promised myself never to forget the songs of my people. But how to remember? So, I wrote down every note that you sang. I will sing them for the rest of my life." He smiled at me with fierce gratitude. "Thank you. I have come home."

I just stared at him, my heart too full, and my face too red, even to speak. I had spent the previous week in the United States lecturing on Kabbalah. I realized, sadly, that on this night I had not been a Kabbalist. I had not received him. My judgment of him had barreled past the truth of his soul print. The musical refrain of the spiritual folk singer kept playing in my mind: "You Never Know You Never Know--You Never Know."

To acknowledge that you do not truly know an other's soul print is to resist the siren's call to reduce another to box and label. To know how much you don't know the other is sometimes the holiest act of receiving the other.

There are all sorts of ways to say "you never know." Sometimes you can redeem others from loneliness just by acknowledging them--by remembering their name or recognizing their face.

Soul Print Practice

Next time you pass someone in the street that you recognize but don't know well, don't turn the other way or look straight ahead or use your cell phone to avoid greeting him. Do just the opposite--clearly recognize your acquaintance, share the pleasure of seeing a familiar face, and if you don't know his name, ask gently.

One of the models for receiving without fully understanding biblical myth's response to an "open hand." "An open hand" is how biblical myth refers to the poor person on the street whose hand is open to receive your gift. Although most of us are not begging on the street with an open hand, are we not all pleading with an exposed and vulnerable heart to be received?

Always fill an open hand. When a person puts out an open palm to you, see it and remember the lines of her soul print.

Whenever you encounter a person with his hand extended for money, don't try and calculate, "Does she really need it, or doesn't she? Does she deserve it or not deserve it?" Admit the fact that you can not fully know. There is a tradition of the Kabbalah that says if you give without checking too carefully whether the recipient "truly deserves it," then God may give to you without checking whether you "truly deserve it." Never walk by without giving something. Take notice of what happens to you when you close your heart and prevent yourself from giving. Pay attention...feel the constriction of your heart. Your heart has been attacked.

Don't label people or put them in boxes.

One way to see through a person's present circumstance to her soul print is to imagine her as a laughing baby. This image is a wonderful means for connecting to her soul print.

The next time you find yourself judging, boxing, or reducing someone else to a label, say to yourself "You never know." Pick a "you never know" melody. Use it like a mantra that permeates your consciousness. Whenever you are about to judge someone, let the melody mantra play in your mind.

Say "Shalom."

Biblical myth law tells us that even when we are in the midst of the highest meditation on divinity--the Shema meditation--we must interrupt the rapture in order to greet a passerby. We greet them with the word "Shalom" which, like the Thai greeting "Namaste," is an affirmation of the God within the other. "Shalom" literally means peace, wholeness, or harmony. It is one of the names of God as well as being a biblical greeting. In the kabbalistic understanding of language, all meanings converge to convey a wider intent. Shalom thus means, "The divine point within me greets the divine point within you."

True, two people saying "shalom" to each other may not have fully received each other's soul prints. Certainly, they do not fully understand each other. Indeed, they may barely know each other. Yet through this point of human contact, the loneliness between the two of them is abated. For in the greeting "shalom" lies a kind of receiving. "Shalom" gives voice to this recognition--that you, the one I greet, have a wonderful and glorious soul print even if I have not yet been privileged to receive it in understanding. There is a level of receiving in the recognition itself. Thus the "shema"--the meditation on divinity--is interrupted to acknowledge a higher divinity, the soul print of the passerby.

Imagine you are standing by yourself in Times Square on New Year's Eve. The ball is about to drop. Surrounded by boisterous strangers, you feel terribly alone. Then someone taps you on your shoulder. You recognize each other, and you exchange greetings. The loneliness you felt has instantly been transformed into connection. Because of the initial experience of isolation, the connection is even more precious.

To Receive the Face of a Stranger

The basis of the law requiring one to interrupt rapture to give greeting is nowhere explicitly stated in the Bible. I believe its source is a stunning biblical myth vignette about Abraham and his guests. Abraham, the first hero of biblical myth, is the image of Plato's philosopher king--a powerful force in affairs of state whose major passion is for truth. In later Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions, Abraham becomes the first great spiritual master. In the text, God appears to Abraham as Abraham is sitting--perhaps in lotus position?--at the entrance to his tent. Abraham sees three strangers approach and says, "Wait a second, God, I have guests," and runs to greet the strangers.

The way the myth-masters read this story, Abraham is in the midst of a meditation on the Godhead. No common activity. In the middle of rapture, he sees some strangers nearing. He breaks his meditation, says to God, "Don't go away I'll be back soon," and goes to greet the visitors, inviting them to sit and have a drink with him. It is a pretty wild description. Can you

imagine how you would respond if, in the middle of merging with the divine, you hear the doorbell? Could you see yourself saying, "Hey, God, hold on for a second, I have to get the door. There may be strangers there and I want to greet them and maybe even invite them in for a drink"?

Strange, indeed. One fourth-century Babylonian wisdom-master explains Abraham's strange behavior with a startling and wonderful epigram: "To receive the face of a guest is greater than receiving the face of the divine."

Sometimes we greet a stranger without words and with no prior recognition of his face. Some of my best friends are people I will never talk to. They are people with whom I have exchanged a knowing look or a meaningful glance, in a crowded bus, in the market, or on a street corner. Although we do not know each other in any conventional way, in every one of those moments, I feel my soul print fully affirmed-- fully recognized--even as it remains fully hidden.

Soul Print Practice

After shaking hands, Sephardic Jews have a tradition of kissing their own hand (as if kissing the trace of the person that lingers on their skin). Buddhists put their palms together and bow, saying "Namaste": "the god within me welcomes the god within you."

Develop a receiving gesture for when you greet another person, whether it be a tip of the hat, a slight bow, or the placement of your hands upon your heart.

If such a gesture doesn't work for you, then try "the two-handed shake." When you shake someone's hand, shake with both hands, so that the shake turns into more of a split-second hold.

Remember, a good image for the soul print is the hand print. The next time you grasp someone's hand, remember that it can be either a mere formality or an opportunity for soul print connection. Imagine that as you receive the other's hand, she is allowing you, for a brief second, to touch her soul print. When people say, "I liked him from the first handshake," they are not referring to firmness of grasp but to an authentically felt moment of soul print connection.

Practice Hospitality: Open Doors in All Directions.

The biblical hero of hospitality, Abraham, had a tent that was open to all four directions, welcoming wayfarers from all sides, of all sorts, at all times. In like manner, make a point of welcoming people from all different directions, from all sides of the social spectrum, from all faiths, all races, and all personality types. When my wife Chaya was a kid, one of her favorite stops in the neighborhood was the home of the Usdan family. People entering their house were greeted by a glass container filled to the brim with M&Ms. To her child eyes (and probably to her adult eyes as well) it was like an invitation to joy-- a wonderful way to be welcomed in. So at our wedding, when we received from the Usdans an identical glass container full of M&Ms, Chaya's eyes filled with tears. Those M&Ms were much more than candies; they represented the art of receiving guests. Chaya understood that the Usdans had passed over to us the gift of giving itself.

Food is a crucial element of hospitality. Always have some delectable on hand for an unexpected visitor. (If chocolates are a bit too much of a temptation for you, have a healthy alternative like baby carrots, fruit, or nuts.)

Honor comings and goings: when people walk through your door, be a door chime: let your voice of welcome be the first sound that greets them.

There is a biblical tradition of escort. Walk your guests all the way out. In an apartment building, ride all the way down the elevator with them; in a house, escort them out to the street.

Consider going as far as taking up Abraham's tradition of ritual washing by pouring warm water over the hands (and for the daring, even the feet) of your guests.

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