

Perennial Wisdom or Perennial Illusion?

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Readings

From *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent*, by Rami Shapiro (pub. 2013)

The term “perennial philosophy”... refers to a fourfold realization: 1) there is only one Reality (call it, among other names, God, Mother, Tao, Allah, Dharmakaya, Brahman, or Great Spirit) that is the source and substance of all creation; 2) that while each of us is a manifestation of this Reality, most of us identify with something much smaller, that is, our culturally conditioned individual ego; 3) that this identification with the smaller self gives rise to needless anxiety, unnecessary suffering, and cross-cultural competition and violence, and 4) that peace, compassion, and justice naturally replace anxiety, needless suffering, competition, and violence when we realize our true nature as a manifestation of this singular Reality. The great sages and mystics of every civilization throughout human history have taught these truths in the language of their time and culture.

From the *Isha Upanishad*, verse 6-7 (translated by Eknath Easwaran)

Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no fear.
Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no grief.
How can the multiplicity of life
Delude the one who sees its unity?

Sermon

Like many of you, I came of age during the 1960s, a time in our nation of upheaval and division: the Civil Rights movement, the war in Vietnam, continuing fears of nuclear annihilation, assassinations – President Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy....

It was also a time, for many, particularly later in the decade and into the 1970s, of spiritual exploration and awakening – so-called New Age, growing interest in Buddhism, in yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and much else.

As for me? Though I was not on the frontlines of activism, I was among those who marched and rallied during those years. And I was also among those drawn to spiritual exploration. For example, majoring in philosophy to see if I could get some answers to the big questions: what’s it all about, where did we come from, where are we going, is there a God, and, if so, what is the nature of God?

In addition to reading, and reading some more, I learned some yoga, and learned the rudiments of meditation.

Further it was helpful for me that our family had discovered Unitarian Universalism by then, so my searching and questioning was more than okay – it was encouraged as part of our new faith.

Answers?

Well, guideposts anyway, touchstones for the journey.

Interestingly, for example, if I had to take a dozen books to the proverbial desert island, most of them would be things I read during those years roughly half a century ago and which have remained part of my life in all the decades since: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Dhammapada*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

What has been the appeal of these particular texts? Well, in varied ways, from Emerson's "Oversoul" to the Chandogya Upanishad to the parables of Jesus, they all include expressions of what is often called the "perennial philosophy" or "perennial wisdom" – a philosophy or wisdom teaching that rang deeply true to me then, and does still.

We heard Rami Shapiro's description of the perennial wisdom in the reading.

My own paraphrase goes something like this:

Our individual self, the self that has a name, roles, personality – sometimes known as ego (not in a pejorative sense, but simply as a way of naming our singleness and individuality) – is a manifestation of a larger reality, in fact the largest reality known by many names: God, Allah, Brahman, Tao, Spirit, Source – many names of one reality. The Hindus put it this way: affirming that Atman (the individual soul) is equivalent to Brahman (the world soul we might say). "That are Thou" they say. "That" our Higher Self as some call it, Emerson's "Oversoul."

Further, this wisdom affirms that we can through certain practices – meditation and yoga for example – go beyond knowing in some logical sense that we are each part of, manifestation of, the larger whole – to *experiencing* ourselves as one with this larger reality.

Yet further, affirms the perennial wisdom, this realizing to one degree or another that our individual nature is part and parcel of the nature of God, Spirit, Universe, Oversoul, is the most important thing we can strive to do in our lives.

Because, among other reasons, to the extent that we do realize this double nature of ours (individual manifestation of the whole), which means realizing the unity of life, we will live more kindly, compassionately, lovingly. (And conversely, living more kindly, compassionately, and lovingly will help us to realize who we most truly are.)

But – still – is all this true? Is it the way things are? Or is it just wishful thinking... illusion to make us feel better in the midst of a random universe?

Well, I for one find it healing and inspiring, this affirmation that beneath the veneer of outward personality and worries we are more than our personality and worries, part of one another, part of the whole, intimately interconnected.

But this doesn't make it true. Wishful thinking and illusions can make us feel better too.

Yet beyond the words and the ideas, I do believe that I *experience* this reality now and then, at least tastes of it – and I expect most of us do. For it might be simpler than all the words may make it seem.

For example, the other morning I woke up feeling a little creaky and tired, I reviewed my “to do” list for the day, and I did a few physical therapy exercises to tend to a slightly worn rotator cuff. In other words, I was starting the day pretty much completely inside my individual self, skin and bones, daily concerns, ego.

Then I headed out the door for a short run in the gently falling snow. And once my legs loosened up, I found myself, without any particular effort, simply feeling like part of the winter scene, part of the falling snow and the snow covered trees, part of the life of my neighborhood. No fancy words necessary, just the experience – not just enjoying the scene out there... but of being and feeling part of it all, a Reality larger than my individual self.

Another experience the same day and for many days – seeing images on the screen of storm ravaged Texas, knowing people were freezing in their own homes, knowing that people were worrying about the safety of their water. And in response feeling – experiencing – such compassion. Why do we feel compassion for people we've never even met? Because we *are* part and parcel of one another, all kin, all part of the larger world of nature. Again, a taste of the larger Reality of which we, each and all of us, are a part.

So, though there are indeed spiritual practices that can help us experience who we are beyond the individual self, I think it also helps simply to notice these mundane yet profound experiences of connection and oneness – with nature, with one another – that we all have at one time or another, whether or not we name them as “mystical” in some high-falutin' sense.

Aldous Huxley, who had composed in the 1940s a several hundred page dense anthology of writings he titled *The Perennial Philosophy*, outlining and illustrating in depth the ideas I've been touching on today, said near the end of his life, “It's a little embarrassing that after forty-five years of research and study, the best advice I can give people is to be a little kinder to each other.”

He of course shouldn't have been embarrassed. His journey was simply something like many of our journeys as T.S. Eliot expressed it: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

Maybe my journey has been a little like that. Maybe yours has been too.

Well, we are living in another time of division and polarization. So I preach this sermon this morning not just because it is the upcoming topic of the class I've been leading, “World Religions: A Personal Journey.” I preach it because I fervently believe we all need more than ever the message – and experience – of life's unity beneath outward appearances; we need it to help us through the loneliness and isolation of these

pandemic times, and we need it to inspire us to be among the healers in this world of too many divisions.

And as you often hear me say: We don't need to do something big and all-encompassing to somehow on our own solve all the world's problems and heal all suffering; we couldn't even if we wanted to or tried. The yearning to "do it all" is real – we just need to remember that the yearning comes from the Oversoul, from the larger Reality of which we are a part from the God within. But as individual manifestations of that Reality, we each are simply called by the perennial, inborn I would say, wisdom of our heart to do just what is in front of us to do – the kind word to the next person, the smile through our mask, sharing a unifying rather than divisive message, whether among friends or on social media... remembering, after all, that we are part of a big team, a huge team of helpers and healers, in this together.

I surely know that I need to remind myself of all this – frequently. I hope it's helpful to you, too.

Remembering, too, as we do whatever we can do, that everything ripples, never stops rippling – for better or worse – from and into the oneness that we are: Echoing the *Isha Upanishad*, seeing ourselves in all creatures, all creatures in ourselves.

Finally, in this spirit, when the Hindu teacher/guru Ramana Maharshi was asked how we are supposed to treat others, he replied, "There are no others."

Amen. Blessed be.